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**Commissioning for social value and voluntary sector
organisations:
tensions in implementation**

Cristina Mititelu

A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements of
The Open University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
(Business and Management)

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Abstract

This thesis contributes to our understanding of commissioning for social value in England by exploring commissioning as practised by local contracting authorities through the lens of front-line workers' experiences in both local authorities and voluntary sector organisations.

This study, which sees an emphasis on social value as an extension of the practice of commissioning for outcomes by local contracting authorities, sheds light on the tension between local authority attempts to improve public services on the one hand and the involvement of voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) in the provision of those services on the other. The Public Service (Social Value) Act 2012 (SVA) points towards a fundamental change that is taking place in the dominant discourse of public service provision. It places greater emphasis on the capacity of local communities, cementing the involvement of the local service providers in policies and services to improve the state's action within this discourse.

The study uses a qualitative explorative case study methodology, informed by interviews and participatory observation methods, to explore individuals' practice as situated within specific institutional contexts. Multiple sources of data were combined holistically from individual case studies. This thesis explores the complex lived realities of practice and yields significant insights into front-line workers' experiences in local contracting authorities and voluntary sector engagement with the commissioning process grounded in providing social value. The thesis questions how front-line workers' everyday practices regarding commissioning for social value are bound up with and contest institutional practices and how this work connects with issues of understanding the policy, co-creates a shared understanding of the policy, and monitors social value in commissioning contracts.

The study has two empirical dimensions: first, the data gathered from the first phase of interviews, with participants holding a range of institutional roles engaged with the commissioning experience; second, the data gathered from three case studies focused on local contracting authorities from east England, in which participants occupied a range of front-line institutional roles. Data analysis demonstrates how established understandings of policy inform the everyday practices of front-line workers and shape practices within the commissioning system's institutional contexts. The thesis proposes new ways of commissioning social value to deliver better outcomes for local people and communities. It throws light on some cases efforts to reach beyond routine commissioning practices and carve out an approach that involves 'working collaboratively with local people and providers to maximise the value created' in the commissioning process.

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List of acronyms

CA	Case A
CB	Case B
CC	Case C
NCVO	National Council for Voluntary Organisations
SAF	Strategic action fields
SEUK	Social Enterprise UK
SVA	Public Service (Social Value) Act 2012
SVI	Social Value International
SROI	Social return on investment
SVUK	Social Value UK
VSOs	Voluntary sector organisations

1 Introduction to the problem and research background

1.1 Background and rationale for this research

1.1.1 The backdrop to the research

Over the last decade, both scientific and public policy literature has placed a growing emphasis on the notion of social value; the term has been adopted by national-level policymakers, international organisations and VSOs worldwide. Social value means enhancing organisations' positive impact on society beyond the strictly economic impact of their activities.

There are few comprehensive reviews of social value implementation in commissioning and procurement practices despite this interest. Changes in managerial attitudes and perspectives surrounding how service delivery contributes social value to targeted beneficiaries and the community are required to ensure effectiveness. The commissioning, which involves various actors with their organisational missions and responsibilities, is one area where social value could be productively applied.

Over the past decades, initiatives such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and the EU's sustainable procurement practices have been major drivers of public interest in the social aspect of business activity.

The strong commitment of the EU to the concept of social value (Tomlin, 2015, p. 14) has given rise to regulatory innovations (e.g., the European Parliament (2011) and Directive 2004/18/EC), which have shaped the regulatory framework of various national public procurement systems, including those in the UK. The European Commission Directive (2014) on the adjudication of concession contracts 2014/23/EU requires a solid commitment to "transparency, competition (...) and economic and socio-environmental return". Reporting frameworks emphasising social value have also been introduced (e.g., ISO 20400 Sustainable Procurement Guidance, Social Value International Frameworks).

In the UK procurement market, the formal introduction of the concept occurred through the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 (SVA), enacted by the UK government and applicable to local authorities' commissioning practices in England and Wales. The policy is not prescriptive and aims to encourage local contracting authorities to consider social value in how they purchase products and services. Social

procurement requirements have been more specific in other national procurement systems, like Australia or Canada, targeting particularly disadvantaged groups at state and federal levels (Raiden et al., 2019, p. 11).

1.1.2 SVA policy aims

The SVA states that commissioners should consider, at the point of procuring a service,

- how the procurement might improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the relevant area;
- how, in conducting the process of procurement, it might act to secure that improvement (Section 1(3), Social Value Act, 2012), and
- whether consultation on social value is needed (Section 1(7), Social Value Act, 2012).

This requirement applies to the pre-procurement stage, i.e., before the process of procurement begins (Section 1(1), Social Value Act, 2012). It is specific to social service delivery contracts and does not include goods or public works contracts. The requirement may be waived if impractical in certain circumstances (Section 1(8), Social Value Act, 2012).

The provision of the Act applies to procurement practices in service delivery and affects how local contracting authorities, government departments and the NHS commission goods and services (Butler, 2011). Under the law, the contracting bodies subject to this regulation are those local authorities subject to the requirements of the Public Contracts Regulations (Public Contracts Regulations, 2015).

The policy aimed to “redress the balance between financial and social value through legislation” (Debson, 2012, p. 2) and to consider the broader benefits brought to the community as longer-term outcomes. It reinforced the importance of providing social value by proposing discretionary reform to the commissioning and procurement process and overcoming the super-marketisation of public outsourcing (Butler, 2011).

Before the SVA, procurement by local authorities was regulated by the Local Contracting Authority Act (1999). This Act imposed an obligation on authorities to secure the best value for services through continuous improvement in how its functions were exercised, focusing on a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Local Contracting Authority Act, 1999, Part I, Section 3 - General Duty). The statutory

guidance on the Act (see Revised Best Value Statutory Guidance, March 2015) clarifies that this duty to secure the best value remains essential. However, councils should consider overall value, which includes social value. Thus, social value is now intrinsically linked with achieving the best value (Raiden et al., 2019, p. 44).

SVA policy objectives and VSOs

The MP Chris White, the SVA's proposer, described the Act as a tool to change how public services are provided and who provides said services. The Act had the intent to support small, locally-based voluntary or community organisations when building social value into everything that councils do (Butler, 2011; White, 2011). Courtney (2018, p. 541) argues that it has been “designed to help charities, and social enterprises unlock a public services market dominated by the big corporates, and to improve commissioning in a ‘risk-averse’ public sector”. It aimed to level the playing field for local service providers (Butler, 2011) and deliver social value. However, although the policy has been “politically driven under the guise of the UK Coalition drive to create a Big Society, it remains poorly conceptualised concerning its relevance and implications on VSOs” (Courtney, 2018, p. 542).

The policy (SVA) was intended to help voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) win more public sector contracts. However, structural factors in the commissioning system make it difficult for these organisations to win public competitions. Moreover, social value thresholds often lead to large contracts for public service delivery, for which VSOs are often not equipped. Some studies have scrutinised the Act's implications for VSOs and whether the Act has improved their commissioning opportunities. It looked as well as whether the SVA has had a positive effect on VSOs and in what ways it has influenced the sector (Boeger, 2017, p. 114; Courtney, 2018, p. 542). Meaningful engagement between VSOs, local authorities, and the Act is low, reflecting its conceptual and methodological shortcomings (Courtney, 2018, p. 541). Vickers et al. (2017, pp. 3-4) note that the gap between the SVA's rationale and impact highlights several contextual factors inhibiting access to these large contracts by small to medium VSOs.

Boeger (2017, p.114) pointed out as well that the SVA legislation “might indirectly bring significant advantages for the voluntary sector”, however, its broader aim is “to encourage authorities to engage with a variety of providers to improve commissioning outcomes for service users and their communities”.

1.1.3 Social value in the commissioning process

This study specifically examines the use of the term *social value* in light of SVA legislation concerning commissioning and procurement practices. While recognising that the term lacks definition, it is outside this study's scope to analyse the concept of social value in detail.

The term social value, in the legislation, is broadly defined. The term overlaps with several other concepts in the scientific literature, including social impact, public value and social capital, in particular, and, more generally, social benefits and outcomes. The concept of social value is “used interchangeably with other related terms such as social benefits, community benefits, social impact, social output, social outcomes and the broader concept of CSR” (Raiden et al., 2019, p. 6). Generally, social value is defined as “the additional benefit to the community”, which results from a “commissioning process over and above the direct purchasing of goods, services and outcomes” (Department for Communities and Local Contracting Authority, 2011, p. 2). In procurement, social value brings attention to “i) how scarce resources are allocated and used, and ii) if £1 spent, how the same amount of money can also produce a broader benefit to the community” (Social Enterprise UK, 2012).

At the local level, the SVA has placed an expectation upon local contracting authorities and VSOs to consider, monitor and evaluate the social value they generate through the contracts they commission and deliver. It has pushed front-line workers to think about social value operationally and engage with it more consistently in performing their duties under the legislation.

A review of the Act's implementation by the UK Cabinet Office found that one significant barrier to its implementation was the difficulty of defining social value (Cabinet Office, 2015). When using the concept, because of the imprecision of legislative terminology, front-line workers interpret and articulate it differently depending on its context (Raiden et al., 2019).

Boeger (2017, p. 114) points out that the policy's effect was to push contracting authorities towards “focusing on service outcomes” and using commissioning to achieve outcomes. Therefore, the Act prioritised commissioning to achieve outcomes and encouraged a more innovative commissioning approach.

In line with these trends, some local contracting authorities have embraced “fundamental system change” regarding cooperative commissioning (Boeger, 2017, p. 115), employing various co-production based models (e.g., co-design and co-production) on an ongoing basis.

In these shifts, social value is understood more as an act of creation through a holistic process of delivering public services, including all interests at stake in the services delivered. Thus, the local authorities are encouraged “to place greater emphasis on the value of service processes” (Boeger, 2017, p. 114). The focus is not only on the value of service outputs. The focus is on “the benefits of how an activity is delivered and who is involved in delivery”.

The Act, to a certain extent, subjects the traditional way of delivering commissioning to scrutiny and prioritises the importance of relationships with the supply chain. It invites a “system approach to tackle complex problems” and taking a holistic perspective on “the private, public, charitable, not-for-profit and community organisations and individuals involved in delivering social value in the community” (Raiden et al., 2019, p. 7).

Raiden et al. (2019, p. 7) stress that the “value of a system approach” to social value provides a “tool to understand and examine the linkages and interactions between the many components that comprise the entirety of the social value creation system”. It highlights that “it brings together the design, construction and operation of that system as an integrated complex composition of many interconnected sub-systems within the context of a wider community environment with specific social needs and priorities”.

1.1.4 Commissioning voluntary organisations as service providers

This section examines the implications of the SVA for the role of VSOs as service providers. The mix of policy reform strategies has influenced public government action and relationships with VSOs as service providers. It moved from a predominately market-oriented regime in the 1980s, focusing on economy, efficiency and performance measurement, to the emergence of governance approaches in the 1990s, which switched attention to outcomes and the effectiveness of local management.

The debate about VSOs delivering public services and local authorities using commissioning has been framed differently during the past three decades. Some of the main stages can be identified (Bovaird and Davies, 2011, pp. 95- 97; Macmillan, 2010). In the early 1990s, contract culture (Macmillan, 2010, p. 5) shaped these relationships, with “concerns about the impact of the state’s interest in harnessing the sector in social welfare”. The enabling role of the state, as envisioned and supported by some new public management (NPM) tenets, is that of steering rather than rowing (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), thus separating policy functions (steering) from delivery functions (rowing). The NPM narrative affected the first wave of commissioning mainly

through the introduction in the early 1990s of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) (Bovaird and Davies, 2011). The CCT lies in systematically comparing, for each main area of public services, the economic convenience of direct delivery by the state (encompassing all levels of government, from national to local) with contracting provision of the service out to private providers. In this sense, it encourages privatisation, enforcing a market-oriented and competition-driven approach to providing public services (Ongaro et al., 2020). This reform favoured the provision of public services at the lowest possible cost. This agenda was replaced in the late 1990s by the so-called *Best Value* approach by local contracting authorities. However, the ‘purchaser-provider split’ has continued to be an integral part of public sector reform (Bovaird and Davies, 2011). According to Schmid (2003, p. 302), it is the basis for analysing the new division of labour between the government, which is responsible for policymaking and determining the standards and quality of the services, and VSOs, as providers, which are responsible for the direct provision of the services.

In this market strategy debate, the attention shifted from inputs to outcomes and away from the importance of competition and performance measurement as central prerequisites in getting value for money, efficiency and effectiveness in service provision (Schedler and Proeller, 2010). The critical issues for VSOs in addressing these shifts included the need for formalisation, the question of mission drift, and the sector’s independence (Macmillan, 2010).

According to McGovern (2013), the government withdrew from the direct provision of some welfare services and increased its partnership with VSOs to cover various services. In Schmid’s (2003, p. 308) view, various ideological and instrumental rationales guided the government to adopt a more strategic partnership for public service provision in the place of in-house provision. Thus, the role of VSOs has been seen as a buffer between the government and the general public. VSOs are also directly involved in negotiations for service provision. They have been considered to fill that gap due to their flexibility and efficient response to the users’ needs.

Moreover, the capacity of VSOs to innovate and bring volunteers into service provision has been recognised. This approach supports the provision of services at a lower cost. The UK Treasury’s Cross-Cutting Review (2002) recognised the significant contribution to service delivery by the VSOs and their role as a critical partner in delivering government policies. It has called on the government and local authorities to explore working more effectively with the sector. Finally, an assessment done by the Audit Commission (2007) encouraged commissioners to perform intelligent commissioning to provide more opportunities for VSOs to engage in public service delivery.

Another shift in commissioning practice occurred in the 2000s, with a novel approach named *strategic commissioning* (Bovaird and Davies, 2011), which focused on outcomes in public services. The concept has emerged as the “dominant discourse, consistent with the broad NPM principle of the purchaser-provider split and the ‘enabling state’, implying that the state continues to step back from direct delivery” (Rees, 2014, p. 49). Bovaird and Davies (2011, p. 94) stress a growing, systematic attempt to put outcome-based strategies at the centre of government decision-making (Rees, 2014). The 2006 White Paper on Creating Strong, Safe, Prosperous Communities set out the vital role of strategic commissioning in ‘place-shaping, i.e., the need for local authorities to work more through partnerships (Bovaird and Davies, 2011, pp. 101-102). The same document argues in favour of providing ‘high-quality services’, extending choice and encouraging more providers in the market (Bovaird and Davies, 2011, pp. 101-102). The aim has been to stimulate the market and to bring better results in service delivery.

The funding landscape transitioned from grants to contracts (Considine, 2001), thus increasing pressure on the organisational operating models of VSOs. The shift brought the market principle of competition into play as the local authorities adopted competitive tendering as a way of allocating contracts to VSOs, as per the Local Contracting Authority Act 1999 (Buckingham and Rees, 2016, pp. 47, 50). It has placed VSOs in a new market-based system of competition and rewards, requiring new roles and functions to increase efficiency and help organisations reach performance targets. The focus is very much on results and outcomes for service users, requiring them to embrace accountability frameworks to demonstrate the result of the contracts, which is not easy for VSOs, especially small- to medium-sized organisations.

Therefore, the outcome-based commissioning model has put VSOs into intense competition for contracts, raising concerns about their autonomy and lacking adequate accountability mechanisms (Rochester, 2012; Milbourne and Cushman, 2013). Milbourne (2009, p. 278) points out that the competitive contracts and performance targets in the commissioning are damaging the work of VSOs. Increasingly, they are asked to prove their value as a crucial parameter for winning contracts and distinguishing themselves from the competition. Consequently, VSOs, especially small and medium-sized ones, face difficulties articulating the outcomes they produce in the community and using models of measurement attuned to such endeavours. The SVA reinforced the commissioning objectives for achieving and demonstrating the outcomes in service provision.

1.2 Scientific literature gap

Social value implementation in the commissioning process is an emerging area of study. A critical factor in the policy implementation process is how the front-line workers required to achieve the policy objectives understand it and interact with supply-side providers who carry out the programme (Sandfort and Moulton, 2015). How these actors interpret appropriate behaviour and constraint in the complex conditions of public service provision is crucial. Policy translates into practice based on how it is interpreted. This study explores the understanding and framing of SVA policy objectives in the commissioning practice. It is observed in the relationship between local contracting authorities and VSOs in delivering public services that generate social value.

Two main tensions have been identified as areas of concern: i) the specific features of the policy design and ii) the usage of the policy (i.e., application). Several sources in the scientific literature and policy analysis have recognised the barriers to the implementation of the SVA. A review assessment on the impact of the Act gave recommendations to address these (Cabinet Office, 2015). In addition, academic research recognised further barriers (Courtney, 2018, p. 542) relating to policy implementation in terms of “1) awareness of the policy; 2) its application, underpinned by an understanding and definition of social value; and 3) the measurement of social value”.

In terms of policy design, the concept of social value is not legally defined. Instead, the policy framework offers a broad, vague understanding of the concept, which allows for interpretation.

The ambiguities inherent in the notion of social value are generally not tackled directly. Both academic and policy literature acknowledges a lack of a single authoritative definition (Wood and Leighton, 2010, p. 19). Moreover, the term lacks a clear theoretical and methodological basis (McLaren, 2011). The concept of social value is understood subjectively. It “changes based on the social needs and places” (Debson, 2012, p. 4) because it depends on the personal preferences of the individuals (Young, 2006; Westall, 2009). It is hard to define due to its “subjective nature” to capture the participants’ real-life experiences. It brings together “incommensurable elements” and “values that are inseparable in the social activity”, such as the ideas of justice and self-determination for the beneficiaries (Young, 2006, pp. 57-58). This study contributes to the ongoing effort to understand and articulate the social value in the commissioning process. It does not aim to judge the policy statements’ limitations but looks at how the front-line workers articulate policy aims in their work and transform them into action.

The policy does not employ fixed, standardised and explicit instructions for its implementation. There are no explicit methodological approaches or frameworks for implementing social value in the commissioning process. The policy resembles a “soft law that does not require compliance but rather tends to specify broad bands of acceptable outcomes, allowing the participants to develop their means of achieving the ends” (Torfing et al., 2012, p. 75).

The SVA has a flexible, non-prescriptive approach. Each local contracting authority can set its definition reflecting its distinct characteristics and priorities (NCVO, 2017). There are no fulfilment obligations for the local authorities on how to use the policy (Social Value Portal, 2018). Finally, Dobson (2012, p. 2) has pointed out that “the Act does not tell public commissioners what aspects of social value to measure and how to do so, but it must be decided locally, by engaging the stakeholders”. Two critical aspects considered here is whether more guidance is needed on what the SVA does allow and facilitate, as opposed to how it is being used

1.3 Definitions

This section sets out a list of the terms underpinning the boundaries of the research. It explains how this study uses the terms and justifies these definitions.

Definition of the term commissioning process

Commissioning and its core functions in service provision must be seen against the background of shifts within the public governance context in which it occurs (Ongaro et al., 2020).

Commissioning is at the core of the public service strategy (HM Government, 2011), and its use describes a complex local system of public service provision. It is a managerial tool that “sits at the interface between policy and service delivery” and forces those who implement it to work out the appropriate division of responsibilities required to deliver the government priorities and outcomes (Migone, 2018).

The concept is being used interchangeably or reduced to other terms like ‘procurement’ or ‘purchasing’ (Murray, 2009, p. 198), ‘business planning’ or ‘strategic management’.

According to Checkland et al. (2012, p. 540), both “commissioners and providers struggled with fundamental ideas underpinning commissioning, suggesting that shared understanding is far from the norm”. For Rees (2014, p. 46, 50), it is useful “to view it as operating on a continuum – between ‘collaborative’ commissioning on one side and ‘commissioning on price/procurement’ on the other side.”

This study argues for good commissioning practice and its usage as a full commissioning cycle. It emphasises the need of strengthening the co-design and co-production dimensions to create social value. It explores the commissioning process cycle as a case study to understand social value implementation regarding the SVA policy.

The study recognises that the complexity of the commissioning process lies in practice between local authorities and VSOs as service providers. This complexity is seen in terms of both a) understanding the concept and b) the implementation of the process to create social value.

It contributes to understanding the concept by unpacking its core features and setting out the scope of commissioning for social value (i.e., the commissioning process’s content, sequence, and scope). It argues for the idea of working with the social value from a perspective of a process, a “system approach” (Raiden et al., 2019, p. 7). Thus, it conceptualises social value as a tool to understand and examine interactions between the many components that comprise the entirety of the social value creation system, where the main feature is engagement. This framework puts stakeholder engagement at the centre of understanding, defining and articulating social value. Within this process, the *citizen’s voice* (i.e., the public in varied organisational forms, both formal and informal) and *action* (at varying levels, including co-design and co-production) are resources to begin a genuine approach towards understanding social value for an individual service or collective services.

VSOs and related terminology

Different terms are used at the European level to define the voluntary sector (e.g., *third sector*, *civil society*, *non-profit*, *voluntary*, *community* or *non-governmental organisations*). However, they all hint at the unifying goal of the sector – a social mission. Indeed, this is essential to the identity of these organisations. However, there is awareness of the terminological confusion in defining the voluntary sector at a more general level. As Billis notes, “the industry is ill-defined and with no agreed name” (2010, p. 9). Voluntary organisations lie

somewhere between the state and the market. The boundary is complicated and blurred, with influences penetrating the private sector (e.g., hybrid organisations such as social enterprises) (Billis, 2010).

Thus, this study employs a broad definition of VSOs. It builds on the logic of those organisations' distinctive characteristics and identity, driven by their particular social mission and purpose. It uses the broad definition of VSOs as used in the UK context and defined by the UK Civil Society Almanac (NCVO, 2012). This choice derives firstly from the consideration that the study is England-based. VSOs lay at the heart of UK civil society. Traditionally, the sector includes all registered charities and excludes government-controlled, independent schools, religious organisations, and others. This study explores organisations with a social purpose and experience in the commissioning process, including the generation of social value, rather than using a sample of organisations based on varying criteria (e.g., size, sector or income generation strategies or location). Thus, the sample involved is diverse, ranging from small to large VSOs and representatives in local infrastructure organisations. Most participants involved in the study are, but are not limited to, front-line workers in the voluntary sector. The prominent professional figures include directors, project managers or volunteer' coordinators. They talk about their experiences with commissioning and its relevance to social value delivery in their organisation and the broader sector.

Throughout this study, the VSOs referred to include forms of charities and social enterprises of different sizes and from different sectors. The study draws together voices from across the broader sector.

Describing the term 'public service.'

The study aims to explore the commissioning process in public service provision. The level of analysis is the local contracting authority commissioning process concerning VSOs. Local contracting authorities "concentrate time and resources on the direct delivery of services compared to central governments" (Kettl and Fesler, 2008).

This study uses the concept of service provision in local governance of the commissioning process in a narrow sense. It sees local governance of the commissioning process for public services as a small laboratory or field of interactions that are flexible and shaped by individual actors' interaction in the field. It accepts the twin premise that each local public service commissioning context varies and that front-line workers implementing policy must consider the local system's complexities. The conditions surrounding each commissioning of services can either facilitate or discourage the consideration of social value in a contract.

By (social) intervention, this study means those interventions that aim to benefit the public (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). The democratic aspect of public service is reflected in its nature of being “in service to the public” (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017; Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000) and designing services that reflect public needs. In building this argument, the work of Denhardt and Denhardt (2003, p. xi) is useful. Entitled ‘The New Public Service: Serving, not Steering’ argues that public administrators do not deliver customer service but deliver democracy.

This study focuses on the commissioning process for public service provision and the suppliers’ role in enhancing social value. It assumes that SVA policy reinforces, to an extent, the democratic dimension in delivering services. Front-line workers are reminded that the provision of services is about serving the general public (in consumer respect) and ‘engaging them’ by acknowledging and meeting their needs appropriately. It reinforces the significance of the local governance process of delivering commissions and engaging the suppliers and the public in the commissioning cycle, putting it at the head of the democratic dimension of engagement and citizenship. In this debate, a fundamental element is the engagement of stakeholders affected by the service delivered.

Defining ‘implementation’

This study aims to understand a policy’s implementation process through case studies, so defining this term is essential. The implementation *brings a practice or practices into action*. The implementation process is the phase in which plans and ideas are realised, which entails conducting activities described in a work plan and reaching policy objectives. When “people seek to implement the policy, they express “agency” (i.e., their ability to make things happen through their actions) and they show their works in relations to other agents, process and contexts”. Implementation is “a process from the outset, not an outcome; therefore, it can be seen as a continuous and interactive accomplishment” (May, 2013, p. 1). The term embedding process means the “processes through which practice or practices become, (or do not become), routinely incorporated in everyday work of individuals and groups” (May et al., 2013). It is about action, that is, how people work.

Implementation process

The implementation process requires direction by managers and involves people with diverse skills and orientations, ranging from executive directors and contract managers to programme directors and volunteers (Sandfort and Moulton, 2015, p. 293; pp. 23-24). The principles for effective implementation practice are “i) knowing the context where you can affect change: the participants and resources, sources of power, and cultural values; ii) [to] unpack the core programme and find changes to bring about public value results; iii) [to] confront the technical and adaptive challenges necessary to create change, applying analytical inquiry and social skill” (Sandfort and Moulton, 2015, p. 25).

Butler and Allen (2008) highlight that policy implementation is “self-organising because national policy becomes reinterpreted at the local level, with each local organisation uniquely mixing elements of policy with their requirements”.

The front-line workers that implement the SVA policy are the commissioners in the local contracting authority. They act as an interface, directly applying SVA policy aims and interacting with supply-side providers, including VSOs, to conduct the desired programme. At this level, the commissioners’ role is to enact the policy agenda for the targeted group of an organisation interested in delivering social value and helping their interaction with the programme.

As required, if it is considered an SVA policy, their role is to decide on and implement social value in the contracted service. Thus, the front-line workers’ agency plays an essential part in deciding, understanding, articulating and demonstrating social value. It is about acting in complex conditions (e.g., complex social issues) and within constraints (e.g., limited budgets).

Defining a position on social value

For this study, the social value understanding in the commissioning field (in the light of SVA) is seen as a new formal society/collective-oriented innovative way of thinking. It is a methodology and a process that encourages engagement as a core function to the whole commissioning process. It emphasizes a ‘relational dimension’ in the cross-sector interactions of the actors engaged in the commissioning process for services and points out towards encouraging a ‘democratic element’ in the provision of the services, where a citizen-centred service is a fundamental parameter to create social value.

A process-based perspective or ‘system approach’ (Raiden et al., 2019, p.7), in understanding social value, allows appreciating the value of varied actors and the interactions that comprise the whole social value creation system in the commissioning process. The system's core features are based on the engagement and the inter-relationships between actors and beneficiaries on developing shared understanding (exchanging ideas and expression of voice) and designing service aligned to local needs and priorities. The outcomes are “socially agreed” and representative of the “collective needs of individuals who share common expectations.” (Westall, 2009). The commissioning process aims to value the citizens, and other stakeholder voices and their needs, as social value has a subjective dimension and changes based on social needs and places (Dobson, 2012).

Therefore, in this study, social value is approached from the lens of a process and method of strategic thinking and planning towards a social value creation system. It requires a coordinated approach to the overall commissioning cycle tasks to create and embed social value in the core functions of the commissioning. Such an approach requires focusing on a relational dimension, learning and creating a shared understanding of the social value in alignment with needs and priorities at the local level. The social skills of the commissioners in this value creation system are essential to framing practical approaches to social value understanding and implementation and brokering relationships towards a consensus on the social value commissioning agenda.

1.4 Aim of the study

In a broad sense, the study explores the commissioning process. Specifically, it investigates the contractual working relationships between the local authorities and VSOs in commissioning services embedding social value. The analysis focuses on front-line workers in local contracting authorities commissioning concerning social value. It explores how they conduct their practice related to their service organisations, specifically VSOs, and examines the tensions in their work. Various participants from various organisations are interviewed at the policy level, and three cases are explored.

This study has two main aims:

First, at the conceptual level, this study aims to describe how the concept of social value is used and the common elements and features in the commissioning process. It aims to articulate how social value fits within the commissioning process and the elements linked to creating social value within the system. It applies an

integrative conceptual framework incorporating the characteristic features shaping social value creation in the commissioning process, based on the theories and literature already explored.

Second, at the practical level, this study aims to understand the implications of the SVA for commissioning relationships between the local contracting authorities and VSOs in England. The goal is to investigate the barriers to implementing commissioning processes with social value. The study delves into social value by grounding it in SVA policy and its implementation.

1.4.1 Objectives of the research

The study objectives are, therefore, to:

- 1) Provide an understanding of the status quo of contractual relationships concerning the state and VSOs' role in service provision and the reform narratives underpinning the commissioning practice in service provision.
- 2) Explore the concepts of the *commissioning process* and *social value*; map the literature perspectives onto the concept of social value and the commissioning process.
- 3) Design an integrative conceptual framework for a social value creation system in the commissioning process.
- 4) Explore how the local contracting authorities and voluntary sector organisations interpret and implement social value as an approach when commissioning for services.
- 5) Discuss tensions experienced by front-line workers between SVA policy and practice. It advocates for a holistic approach towards conceptualising social value, seeing it as central to the commissioning process. It explores social value implementation within the commissioning process, mainly through the front-line workers' frame of action and collective approach, to understand the social value. This framework aims to understand a collective-contentious approach to co-constructing social value in the commissioning process. It will provide a framework that argues for the involvement of the people affected or implementing the process in defining social value. At the core of this framework is learning, explicitly understanding the community's needs, the suppliers and practices, and the ultimate impact of providing social value.

1.4.2 Research questions

How do front-line workers in the commissioning process take up and frame an approach to social value and implement it in local commissioning practices?

How have commissioning practices been affected by the SVA?

How have VSOs been affected by the commissioning practices?

What are the implications for local contracting authorities and VSOs?

1.4.3 Methodology and research design

This research is designed through a series of case studies. It explores front-line workers' commissioning practices in local contracting authorities and VSOs with SVA implementation in England.

The study follows a qualitative methodological approach by exploring “how people make meaning” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 35) and the “holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). While using a single embedded case study approach to examine the commissioning process, different subcases enable us to study the investigated phenomenon, and multiple sources of evidence can be accessed (Yin, 2009). The research questions focus on *how*, aiming to establish an in-depth, contextual exploration of the complex phenomenon.

The focus of this case study is the commissioning process. A conceptual framework is provided, setting out a means of discussing the content, scope, and sequence process. The case examines the different stages of the commissioning process, with particular attention paid to the decision-making, strategic planning (i.e., service design) and delivery (i.e., procurement and monitoring) of public services. Particular emphasis is placed on the stage of co-designing the services.

The study looks at the commissioning process taking place between the local contracting authorities and VSOs. Particular focus is given to front-line workers, who carry out the policy implementation and exercise their agency (i.e., their ability to make things happen through their actions) through doing so.

The case is informed by primary (i.e., empirical findings from fieldwork) and secondary data (i.e., policy and academic literature).

The fieldwork investigated the implementation of the policy. It was explorative, intended to delve into the lived experiences of the front-line workers involved in the commissioning process, both for local authorities and VSOs in England. They work on the ground, engaging with the concept of social value.

The data collection involved multiple methods, including semi-structured interviews, document analysis and participant observation—the data analysis used thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process employed an interactive and abductive approach; the researcher often moved between the findings and the literature review (i.e., peer-reviewed journals and grey literature) to generate the analysis.

The data collected was derived from two planned phases of data-gathering, collecting the local contracting authorities' experiences with social value in England, first from a national and then a local perspective.

The first phase of fieldwork, undertaken between January and September 2018, included interviews and informal conversations with organisations at varying policy levels (e.g., consultants, commissioners, project managers from VSOs) and learning their opinions regarding how the SVA is implemented.

The second phase of fieldwork, undertaken between June 2018 and February 2019, involved three cases (labelled case CA, case CB, case CC), focusing on three local contracting authorities in England's southeast. The data collected varied for each case with the researcher's access to data.

The data was gathered from different levels, and extrapolations are founded upon the case analysed, contextual evidence, and development trajectories. The nature of the information gathered varies at each level and within the cases selected. The sampling strategies used were purposive and, occasionally, opportunistic. The participants interviewed included the front-line workers and several experts with experience in commissioning practices and the SVA at the local level.

1.4.4 The theoretical frame of analysis

This analytical study frame builds on the primary elements of the SAF theory (Flingstein and McAdam, 2010, 2012).

Considering SAF and how it shapes the field of commissioning introduces it to a field of interactions and forms of interpretations as per the strategic interests involved that shapes the field. Skilful actors who interpret the rules and mobilise resources to carry out the policy are crucial (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). It considers the commissioning process as a field of policy goals, interactions and practices that shapes the space of service provision between the local contracting authorities and supply chain, competing to win contracts embedding social value. The theory supports understanding the complex environment of the commissioning process for social value and the power dynamics among the actors involved. The commissioning process is envisioned as a field where a range of actors' actions is occurring.

The local authority commissioners, as incumbents, who shape the agenda on commissioning with social value as per their strategic interest can choose to be open and creative to explore the opportunities offered by the SVA.

In this spectrum of things, the element of social skills is essential. It can determine whether the actors choose to take up, frame and interpret the policy goals for social value in the traditional technocratic procurement or a more creative way, putting a relational approach at the core of the commissioning process. Social skills outline, among others, the “ability to induce cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 46). Also, the use of skills and tactics (framing, brokering) is believed appropriate in the context, and that shape the social dynamics (either of coercion, competition and cooperation) to reach goals (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). Therefore, the front line workers social skills can allow them to interact and create a consensus around the agenda of social value policy in the commissioning and procurement process. It influences how they frame and implement social value in the commissioning process.

Thus, for the actors' action with the commissioning for social value, the social skills in framing and initiating collective strategic action to share understanding on the social value are critical to the analysis in this context. It outlines how the actors take up and frame the approach to social value.

Considering that this study aims to explore the implementation of the policy, such an approach is supported by other studies as well. Moulton and Sandfort (2017) argue that such an approach is well-suited to make sense of the variations seen in implementation across settings and use skilful actors in implementation improvement.

1.5 Overview of the work

Chapter One has set out the problem investigated by this thesis. It has outlined the gap in current literature, the research aims, research questions and the methodology employed in this study.

Chapter Two is the literature review, which is divided into four parts. The first part examines the relationships between government as commissioners and VSOs as service providers. The second part focuses on unpacking the commissioning process and its core features at a conceptual level. The third part examines the social value in the commissioning process, with particular emphasis on the SVA. Finally, a fourth part outlines the theoretical perspectives underpinning this study, namely SAF theory.

Chapter Three sets out the research methodology. The chapter presents the rationale for using a qualitative approach and embedded case studies, explains the data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations, reflexivity, and research validity.

Chapter 4 outlines the findings, analysed thematically.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings through the lens of SAF, examining the factors which influence the interpretation and implementation of social value.

Chapter 6 presents the conclusions. It outlines the main findings, the study's contribution to knowledge. It also acknowledges the limitations of this study before suggesting potential avenues for future research.

2 A review of the literature

2.1 Introduction

This chapter has four main sections. The first part (Section 2.2) examines research evidence and the policy context concerning public service delivery and commissioning, alongside the relationships between the government and VSOs in the UK.

The second part (Section 2.3) investigates the conceptual development of the commissioning process and procurement practices. The third part (Section 2.4) focuses on the concept of social value, emphasising SVA policy in the commissioning process. The fourth part (Section 2.5) outlines the legal framework of SVA. Finally, the fifth part (Section 2.6) outlines the analytical framework underpinning this research.

Spotlight on the literature review processes

The review involved several steps and followed the principle of thematic coding. First, the search focused on a database collection of peer-reviewed journals that explored the concept of social value in the policy and scientific literature. It includes journal articles published from 2000 till the present.

Second, the search added grey literature. This included policy, think tank and consultancies reports and case studies on the websites of relevant policy-driven and voluntary sector infrastructure organisations.

The documentary sources taken into consideration for the secondary data collection were:

- Articles, published and unpublished;
- Relevant articles from scientific journals and published and unpublished reports, at national and international level;
- Local authority reports and publications;
- Central and local authority legislation;
- Local authority website documentation.

The following table (Table 2.1) outlines the data sources for the literature analysis ranging from the peer review journal to grey literature. Peer-reviewed journals about the voluntary sector were consulted. The primary grey literature sources of databases were explored concerning the voluntary sector role in the

commissioning and social value policy. The keywords used were various, focusing on the commissioning process, outcomes and social value concepts, and the local authority and voluntary sectors.

Table 2.1 Sources of literature search

Major peer-reviewed journals	Major databases used for grey literature and books	Keywords used
<p>VOLUNTAS; Voluntary Sector Review; Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly; Non-profit Management and Leadership; Community Development Journal; Social Enterprise Journal, and Journal of Social Entrepreneurship.</p> <p>Four peer-reviewed journals cited in the Web of Science Social Sciences Citation Index (2015): (e.g., NPVSQ, NPML, CDJ, VOLUNTAS), and three other recognised peer-reviewed journals (i.e., VSR, JSE, SEJ).</p>	<p>Policy database</p> <p>NAVCA,</p> <p>SEUK,</p> <p>TSRC,</p> <p>SV UK,</p> <p>Google Scholar</p> <p>Sage Journals</p> <p>Wiley</p> <p>Google</p>	<p>social value; outcomes; social outcomes; social value definition; commissioning and social value; commissioning for outcomes; local authority commissioning and social value; Social Value Act; social value creation in local authority</p>

Source: elaborated by the researcher

2.2 Government-VSO relationships

2.2.1 Reform narratives and commissioning: a spotlight

In the UK, at the beginning of the 1980s, Thatcher, Prime Minister from 1979 until 1990, introduced profound, market-orientated changes. There was a shift in public funding institutions’ role from a direct provider of services to that of a purchaser. This new role as purchaser and enabler, further reinforced under the modernisation reform principles of NPM, was that of a steering catalytic government (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), which separated the policy functions (steering) from the delivery functions (rowing). The NPM approach (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992) sought a new vision and re-thinking of public management

through a range of business-like techniques borrowed from business management. The characteristics of this new strategic market regime fostered a public management-oriented system that was less bureaucratic, more flexible, more entrepreneurial and focused on “*results in terms of “value for money”, and on clients, outputs and outcomes*” (OECD, 1998, p. 5). The model was typified by management through objectives and performance measurement, the use of market-type mechanisms, competition and choice, and the devolution of authority, responsibility and accountability.

According to Bovaird and Davies (2011, p. 94), the UK approach was one of the most systematic attempts to put ‘outcome’-based strategies at the centre of government decision-making. It sought to use the steering potential of quasi-market systems to replace public sector planning as the prime driver for public service improvement. It resulted in a mandatory split between public service planners and service purchasers (Bovaird and Davies, 2011), a vital feature of the move to internal markets. In Bovaird’s view, the advantages of this split included: i) joined-up services systematically planned and based on assessed need; ii) an orientation towards outputs and outcomes rather than merely activities; iii) increased awareness of costs; iv) increased contestability which, in turn, would reduce inefficiency, and v) more autonomy for managers (Bovaird and Davies, 2011, p. 96).

On the other hand, the new governance approaches (e.g., new public governance) further increased the focus on outcomes. According to Osborne (2009, p. 6), these approaches prioritised a “pluralist state and multiple processes informing the policy-making system where multiple inter-dependent actors contribute to public service delivery”. It aimed to “co-production of public services, inter-organisational relationships and the governance of processes—stressing service effectiveness and outcomes”. Thus, the external environment of the public organisations became more significant. The networks of actors on which organisations depended became the focus. According to Jackson (2001), these new approaches’ guiding principle was less concerned with outcomes and more with the process and public sector tradition based on procedures and rules (Peters and Pierre, 2002). Therefore, it facilitated: (i) involvement of a wide variety of actors, facilitating information sharing and a better understanding of the complexities (Jackson, 2001, p. 17); (ii) inter-organisational capacities that served cross-sectoral issues rather than narratives with an intra-organisational solid focus (Jervis and Richards, 1997); as well as (iii) collaboration, which fostered local knowledge and experience (Jackson, 2001).

The “new public service” represents another means of providing public management which is practical and based on democratic governance (DeLeon, 2005, p. 111). According to Denhardt and Denhardt (2003, p. xi), public administrators “do not deliver customer service”; instead, they “deliver democracy”. For Perry (2007,

pp. 7-8), public service is built on varied principles, including (a) serving the general public, not customers, (b) seeking the public interest and valuing citizenship over entrepreneurship, (c) thinking strategically, acting democratically, (d) recognising that accountability is not simple, (e) serving rather than steering, and (f) valuing people, not just productivity.

Commissioning transition in the UK

The first stream of service commissioning emerged in the public administration discourses alongside NPM reform narratives. Different principles (e.g., the choice of the resource allocation and increased professional services) and mechanisms (e.g., CCT, the purchaser-provider split) influenced the policy agenda (Bovaird et al., 2012).

According to Bovaird and Davies (2011), the first stage of transition to commissioning was in the early 1990s, as part of CCT. In the late 1990s, New Labour replaced CCT with the best value principle for local contracting authorities. However, the ‘purchaser-provider split’ continued to be an integral part of public sector reform. Between 1997 and 2010, New Labour progressively shifted towards targets and performance management frameworks, which became increasingly focused on outcomes (Bovaird and Davies, 2011).

Another shift occurred with the development of strategic commissioning, which again pushed the emphasis for public services towards outcomes (Bovaird and Davies, 2011). Both central and local contracting authorities were committed to seeing how outcome-based commissioning could be used to create government policy and procure public services, whether in-house or outsourced, beyond mere programmes of action. This change was associated with Every Child Matters White Paper and the Strategic Commissioning Framework for the Children’s Act 2004, which further introduced using payment mechanisms such as Payment by Results. Strategic commissioning emerged as the “dominant discourse, consistent with the broad NPM principle of the split between purchaser-provider” and the “enabling state, implying that the state continues to step back from direct delivery” (Rees, 2014, p. 49). Bovaird and Davies (2011, p. 94) underlined a growing systematic attempt to put “outcomes”, rather than “outputs” at the “core of government decision-making” (Rees, 2014). The 2006 White Paper highlighted the vital role of ‘strategic commissioning’ in place-shaping, and local authorities need to work more through partnerships (Bovaird and Davies, 2011).

2.2.2 Policy reforms agenda and VSOs as service providers

The engagement of VSOs in welfare provision and public policy has increased and changed over the past few decades (Billis, 2010; Breeze et al., 2015). Using a repertoire of managerial practices, NPM became influential in the 1980s and 1990s to provide public services, contracting and payment for service. Furthermore, the VSOs have been exposed to managerial models and re-thinking service delivery (Billis, 2010).

Over the past decades, the state has withdrawn from the direct provision of some welfare services and increased partnership orientation with VSOs to cover them (McGovern, 2013). Schmid (2003, p. 308) pointed to several ideological and instrumental rationales that justified strategic partnerships for public service provision, replacing in-house provision. Consequently, VSOs have been seen as a buffer between the government and the general public, as they are now directly involved in negotiations for service provision. VSOs were chosen to fill that gap due to their flexibility and efficient response to the users' needs. As such, their capacity for innovation and for bringing volunteers into service provision was appreciated. It also enabled the proliferation of hybrid organisations (e.g., social enterprises) as a tool of the new-capitalist view (Dufays and Huybrechts, 2014, p. 215), and which pursue both social and commercial goals (Billis, 2010).

According to Cornforth and Brown (2014), three main trends catalysed these changes: i) the devolution of government power and creation of quasi-autonomous organisations to deliver services; ii) the creation of quasi-markets and the divide between purchaser and provider, and iii) government reliance on arm's lengths forms of control to assess performance (e.g., target-setting, service level agreements). For him, these trends shaped the growth and development of the voluntary sector, leading to i) increased engagement in public service delivery; ii) greater participation in cross-sector partnerships and joint action to solve complex social problems, and iii) encouragement from the government to support active citizenship and social capital to address a complex social issue.

Institutional efforts have been to promote voluntary sector visibility by creating representative institutions (Breeze et al., 2015). Going beyond the traditional logic of hierarchy and state control (Milbourne, 2009), the 1998 Labour government promoted the compact policy agenda to increase the partnership of the state, the voluntary sector and community at different levels. The compact is a framework agreement that outlined "a shared vision, values, general principles, and a mutual commitment to building a positive future relationship" (Jones and Liddle, 2011, p. 158) between the sectors. Cornforth and Brown (2014) noted that the New Labour government boosted the VSOs' role in public services by promoting social capital and inclusion, dealing with

anti-social behaviour in the community and improving the funding relationship. New Labour (1997–2010) supported this discourse of partnership between sectors. This discourse persisted beyond 2010, albeit within much tighter financial constraints due to austerity and budgetary cuts (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2015, p. 104).

Implications for VSOs

The interface with market pressure raises several challenges to VSOs as service providers. The transition to public service governance contracts (Considine, 2001) has placed the VSOs in a new market system of competition and reward, requiring new roles and functions to becoming more efficient and reach performance targets. The highly competitive and professionalised regulatory framework has placed VSOs in the same market framework as profit or commercial organisations. Contractual funding has brought the market principles of competition. Local authorities have had to adopt competitive tendering as a means of allocating contracts to VSOs, under the Local Contracting Authority Act 1999 (Buckingham and Rees, 2016, pp. 47, 50).

Alongside the shift to contracts, the attention has moved to monitoring, regulation and inspection (Cornforth and Brown, 2014). The increased attention on outcomes and impact (NCVO, 2017) required being accountable, monitoring and evidence results. The 2010 Spending Review highlighted how the government had increased the variety of public services. Also, how the increase of competition and consumer choices had expanded the use of payment by results across various service areas. These changes required a payment system for outcomes rather than inputs, outputs or processes of any service. It increased both the challenges and opportunities for the VSOs, in line with other organisations.

Resource dependence is one of the criteria that drive sectors towards the market and drive interaction between them (Guo and Acar, 2005; McGovern, 2013). Consequently, all organisations in contact with the market are pressured to change and adapt to its contractual regulations.

The competitive context requires a new set of skills (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014) to plan and evaluate services and understand long-term benefits for the community (Harlock, 2014, p. 4). The challenges for both the commissioners and providers are defining the outcomes and measuring them in a credible way (NCVO, 2017). The VCSE Sector (2016, p. 8) outlines how “large VSOs are challenged to demonstrating the outcomes

which their competitors can also demonstrate, while also demonstrating added social value”. Small voluntary organisations require time and investment in building and maintaining effective partnerships (McGovern, 2013). These organisations are ill-placed due to power asymmetries that give more control to influential organisations in exchange for resources (Guo and Acar, 2005). Some have chosen to scale up and professionalise and are now delivering large-scale service contracts in the public service system.

The use of the compact in public service delivery set out a clear expectation that public authorities should consider social outcomes before initiating a procurement process and concluding a contract (NCVO, 2017). The process ensures the defined social outcomes and priorities to improve the local community’s overall well-being are achieved (Compact Voice, 2014, pp. 11, 14). The introduction of the SVA (NCVO, 2017) intended to produce a more favourable environment for VSOs to provide public services. It created a new opportunity in the commissioning process to embed social value in the provision of services, to drive public services’ “efficiency, effectiveness and innovation, by opening more public service areas to VSOs” (Cabinet Office, 2010, p. 9). Under the new policy, the VSOs, when bidding for service provision contracts, needed to consider how to evidence the social value created, identify social outcomes and evidence their achievements (Compact Voice, 2014; NCVO, 2018). They might do this directly by winning contracts, or by developing opportunities as sub-contractors, or independently influencing the design of services. However, the commissioning contracts for social value are now often delivered by organisations of different sizes and nature, from the public, private or voluntary sectors (Cabinet Office, 2010, p. 7).

2.2.3 VSOs and value creation

Research on the sector points to the potential for transforming and creating value in public services. According to the NCVO (2017), VSOs can be a significant stakeholder in commissioning and procurement practices by embedding social value since they have expertise across a range of social issues and sectors and play a vital role for various disadvantaged groups. Various studies recommend strengthening the engagement between the public and voluntary sectors. The NCVO (2017) advises public commissioners to use the compact as a tool to engage with VSOs when designing services to tackle issues ranging from unemployment to social care. Similarly, the VCSE Sector (2016, p. 63) suggests that commissioners “engage with and recognise the value of VSOs in developing strategic plans and when commissioning services”. Vickers et al.’s (2017, p. 6) report, while noting a gap in the practical implementation of procurement strategies of the city governments,

recommends: i) increasing engagement and access of VSOs in pre-contract strategic engagement for a greater understanding of the impact and to better design the services and contribute and benefit from the SVA; and ii) maximising the potential of the social economy through public procurement, which could contribute directly to inclusive economic development.

The support for VSOs' engagement in public services is driven by:

i) the sector's capacity for innovation. It can "increase market choice and help to identify gaps in provision, feed in the local perspective on re-design or re-provision of services plus to offer more innovative solutions to social problems" (Jones and Liddle, 2011, p. 160).

ii) the trust and the closeness to the beneficiaries or users of the service. That is, the flexibility, the reach VSOs have into local communities, and their ability to build and maintain relationships and their capacity to target hard-to-reach groups enables them to act as advocates and niche experts who involve service users (Jones and Liddle, 2011).

iii) the holistic nature of VSOs and their embeddedness in local communities. A sector's "strength lies in its holistic, community-embedded and personalised approaches" (VCSE Sector, 2016, p. 63) and can have a "long-term, relational and locally-rooted"(p. 7) working nature.

iv) the expertise of local communities. Local experts have a role in promoting understanding of their communities' specific and often inter-sectional needs. They are trusted providers delivering both accessible and holistic services. In a commissioning system aiming to address health and well-being inequalities, the VSOs might provide information and, by engaging with the people concerned, might reduce both human and financial costs (VCSE Sector, 2016, pp. 16-18). Also, Hunter et al. (2016, pp. 8-15) noted that they are embedded in the communities and have valuable knowledge of local requirements and boost social capital.

v) the cost and creation of value. The strengths of such engagement are visible in solving complex socio-economic problems and improving outcomes for people with complex needs (Hunter et al., 2016, pp. 8-15). The VCSE Sector (2016, p. 12) points out that "it is valuable for commissioners to get out into the communities they serve to see the positive impact of the VSOs and gain an appreciation of what the community itself has to offer in terms of peer support, co-production and social value". Currently, the most difficult challenge for the voluntary sector, particularly the small and medium providers, is to demonstrate the value of their services using evaluation frameworks, as per the requirements of the public sector. Arvidson (2009, pp. 2-4) noted the difficulty in validating the sector's added value compared to others.

2.3 Commissioning process: a conceptual frame

2.3.1 Use of the term

Traditionally the term *commissioning* has been used to refer to contract. It has progressively evolved towards a broader usage in terms of a bundle of tasks underpinning the provision of public services. Nevertheless, the term remains problematic (Murray, 2009; Rees, 2014; Migone, 2018). There is no standard definition, which leads to it being used interchangeably with procurement and purchasing, business planning, strategic management and outsourcing (Sturgess, 2018). For Migone, however, it “sits at the interface of policy and service delivery” and “while it fits with the contacting space, it is not merely procurement” (2018, p. 298).

Traditionally, the word offers “a consistent implication that something is being taken forward on behalf of someone else, or some other authority like instruction or an obligation” (Hunter, 2019, p. 8). Also, it is about “delegation to a third party to undertake a defined task, for which purpose the agent is entrusted with some of the authority and resources of the principal or client” (Sturgess, 2018, p. 157).

Some writers have sought to “clarify the distinctions between commissioning and procurement” (Murray, 2009; New Economics Foundation (NEF), 2014, p. 6) or the purchase phase of the service, “although they are often conflated” (Macmillan, 2010, p. 9) and commissioning encompasses procurement (Murray, 2009). According to the NEF (2014, p. 6), procurement is part of the commissioning cycle, in which services are put out to tender, contracts are drawn up, and the services are purchased. The NEF (2014, p. 6) defines commissioning as “using all available resources to achieve outcomes for people, building on their needs, assets and aspirations”; procurement is “the legal and technical process of seeking bids and acquiring goods or services from an external source”. Similarly, Macmillan (2010, p. 9) notes that “procurement is the processes involved in purchasing goods and services from provider organisations”, while “commissioning is a broader set of service delivery processes which involve consultation, needs assessment and service planning and design”.

The concept of commissioning nowadays has a broader application and usage and goes beyond the traditional form of contracting (Bovaird et al., 2012; NCVO, 2018; NEF, 2014; Field and Miller, 2017). The Office of the Third Sector (2006, p. 5, see also Macmillan, 2010, p. 9) defines it as “the cycle of assessing people's needs in an area, designing and then securing an appropriate service”. It focuses on a commissioning cycle of interlinked stages – analysis, planning, delivery, procurement, monitoring and review – an approach widely

adopted across government (Bovaird et al., 2012). According to the NCVO (2018), a good commissioning process should be based on a standard accepted cycle of activities, including i) analysis (of needs, policies and resources); ii) planning (shaping services); iii) delivering/procurement; and iv) mentoring and review, by involving service users.

Rees (2014, p. 46) notes that “commissioning is still in development in theory and practice (...) and operates at different scales between national and local levels”. He suggests that it might be helpful “to view it as operating on a continuum between - intelligent/collaborative commissioning, on one side, and ‘commissioning on price/procurement’, on the other side” (Rees, 2014, p. 50).

2.3.2 Core features of the commissioning process

This section exemplifies the main core features of the commissioning cycle and its rationales conceptually.

According to Colgan et al. (2015, p. 21), commissioning is “a strategic, cyclical process involving a series of linked tasks, such as needs analysis, priority setting, service design, procurement, monitoring and evaluation”. Thus, commissioning is a “strategic, cyclical process with interlinked stages and tasks, where the elements of the process work together to deliver coherent strategic planning and resource allocation” (pp. 15-16). In their views, it is “a long-term strategic planning tool that seeks to link resource allocation with critical policy objectives” (p. 11), and it involves: i) value for money; ii) meeting present and future needs; iii) quality improvement; and iv) service user outcomes. Also, it includes “procedures, processes, structures and relationships that are all connected to the task of making and implementing decisions about resource allocation for service provision” (p. 10).

An essential starting point of the commissioning cycle is assessing needs. The UK Cabinet Office (2006, p. 4), in their report on partnerships in public service within the third sector, defines the commissioning process as “the cycle of assessing the needs of people in an area, designing and then securing appropriate services”. Macmillan (2010, p. 9) noted a “broader set of service delivery processes involving consultation, needs assessment, service planning and design”. Also, citing Hussey and Hussey’s (1997) analysis on commissioning, Murray (2009, p. 199) points out some common themes, across various developed models, in the commissioning cycle, including: i) a strategic needs assessment; ii) deciding priorities and outcomes;

iii) planning and designing services; iv) options appraisal; v) sourcing; vi) delivery; and vii) monitoring and review.

The scope and reasons for using commissioning in public service delivery are varied (HM Government, 2011; Colgan et al., 2015; Carson et al., 2010). According to the Open Public Services report (2011, p. 29), the purchaser/provider split encourages “new, innovative providers to compete for contracts”. Macmillan's (2010, p. 9) views relate to deciding “what to buy and how and obtaining” a good, a service, or an outcome. Thus, the commissioning aims to ensure that the most effective services are funded and implemented. Thus, as noted in the UK Government White Paper (2011), commissioning “increases choice, opening up services to a wider range of providers, devolving decision-making to the lowest appropriate level and making public services more fair, transparent, effective and accountable”.

Also, in the Open Public Services report (2011, p. 31), it is not just about “opening up services to competition, but also empowering all potential providers, from varied sectors to propose new innovative ways to deliver services linked as well with payment to results”.

The crucial policy drivers and rationales for introducing commissioning are the value for money (VfM), the place agenda (i.e., area-based integrated service provision) and personalised/individualised services (Colgan et al., 2015, pp. 10-11).

In delivery, according to Carson et al. (2010), commissioning is about: (i) placing people at the heart of commissioning thinking; (ii) understanding the needs of communities; (iii) sharing and making better use of information; (iv) quality assurance in the provision; (v) improving partnership working and flexibility; and vi) improving capability and leadership.

Thus, the strategic aims of commissioning are to achieve better outcomes and value for the users of the services commissioned. It is an instrumental tool –a means to an end– based on a process of interlinked planned activities, with a “focus on ends rather than means” (Bovaird et al., 2012), the ends being to build better services for service users and communities (Murray, 2009). The “outcome, the result, is one of the main aims of public services: improving citizens’ lives and their long-term prospects” (Carter et al., 2018, p. 4), in terms of adding value in health, well-being, education, employment and the environment. According to Field and Miller (2017, p. 56), commissioning has a broader perspective in that: i) it reflects the economic, environmental and social outcomes for the geographical area concerned; ii) the role of the commissioning organisation in bringing this about uses all available means to achieve outcomes; and iii) it adopts the

principle of sourcing, that is, it determines the best way of meeting outcomes, including through the contributions of people and communities.

The commissioning cycle

The commissioning cycle incorporates interlinked tasks to be followed by the commissioners. Often, the whole sequence is not followed by commissioners, who may stop at the pre-procurement stage or when buying services and programmes. Making full use of the potential entailed in the process depends on the commissioners, understanding of both the commissioning process itself and the concept of social value and their skills in applying the latter.

Thus far in the UK, the emphasis has been placed on the different parts of the commissioning cycle (Rees, 2014). The trends emphasise a resource-constrained, large-scale and payment by results contracting (Rees, 2014, p. 47).

One widely used model is the interlinked stages model, as in the Institute of Public Care (IPC) Commissioning Cycle model (Bovaird et al. 2012; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2019). It follows a series of broad interlinked tasks (e.g., needs analysis, priority setting, service design, market-shaping/procurement, monitoring and evaluation) which configure commissioning as a series of processes. However, it is rare to see such a neat continual interaction between activities. Instead, a focus on the procurement stage tends to prevail. The Commissioning Cycle model has been adopted by many UK government departments (Bovaird et al., 2012) and applied in various sectors, including health, social care, education, and social care and housing (CIPS, 2010, p. 9). The model distinguishes the commissioning cycle and purchasing/contracting cycle while emphasising the central aim of securing outcomes for people. The first task, *analysis*, refers to assessing needs and priorities, for example, resource analysis, review service provision and needs assessment. The second task, *planning*, refers to the development of service specifications, for example, gap analysis or service design. The third task is *doing*, which refers to the arrangement of services, support, and contract management: market/provider development or provider relationships. The fourth task, *review*, refer to contract monitoring and the review of strategic outcomes: review strategies and market performance.

According to CIPS (2010, p. 8), the commissioners have the power to manage relationships and “learn about the market” and get involved in “market knowledge and the professional activities of market and supplier/provider relationship management” (p. 7). Murray (2011) sees the role of commissioners

strategically, using their purchasing power and influence to ensure that publicly funded systems achieve the required outcomes using the resources available. Thus, they have the power of “deciding how to use the total resources available to achieve desired outcomes in the most efficient, effective, and sustainable way” (Hunter, 2019, p. 11).

According to Bovaird et al. (2012, p. 15), “conceptualising commissioning in terms of outcomes introduces the dimension of the citizen” and their expectations, involving them more fully in the commissioning process. The Open Public Services (2011, p. 31) report noted that the “public’s priorities drive the type of service commissioned”. In the view of Dickinson (2015, p. 17), a high-quality commissioning standard has person and outcome-focused objectives at its core.

The Cabinet Office, the Office of the Third Sector (2006, p. 18), reporting on partnership in public services, stated eight principles of good commissioning for all public commissioners of services. The first principle is “to develop an understanding of the needs of users and communities by ensuring that, alongside other consultees, they engage with VSOs to access their specialist knowledge”. The second principle is “to consult potential providers”, including the VSOs, among others, “in advance of commissioning new services” while working with the providers to set priority outcomes for specific services. The third is to place users’ issues at the heart of the strategic planning process. The fourth principle involves mapping the entire possible range of providers to understand their contribution to delivering those outcomes. Fifth, the commissioners should consider “investing in the capacity of the providers, particularly those working with hard-to-reach groups”. The sixth principle emphasises the need to ensure that “processes are transparent and fair”, allowing the engagement of “the broadest range of suppliers, including considering subcontracting and consortia-building where appropriate”. The seventh is to “ensure long-term contracts and risk-sharing wherever suitable as ways of achieving efficiency and effectiveness”. Finally, the eighth principle emphasises the need “to get feedback from service users, communities and providers”, which allows a review of the “effectiveness of the commissioning process in meeting local needs”.

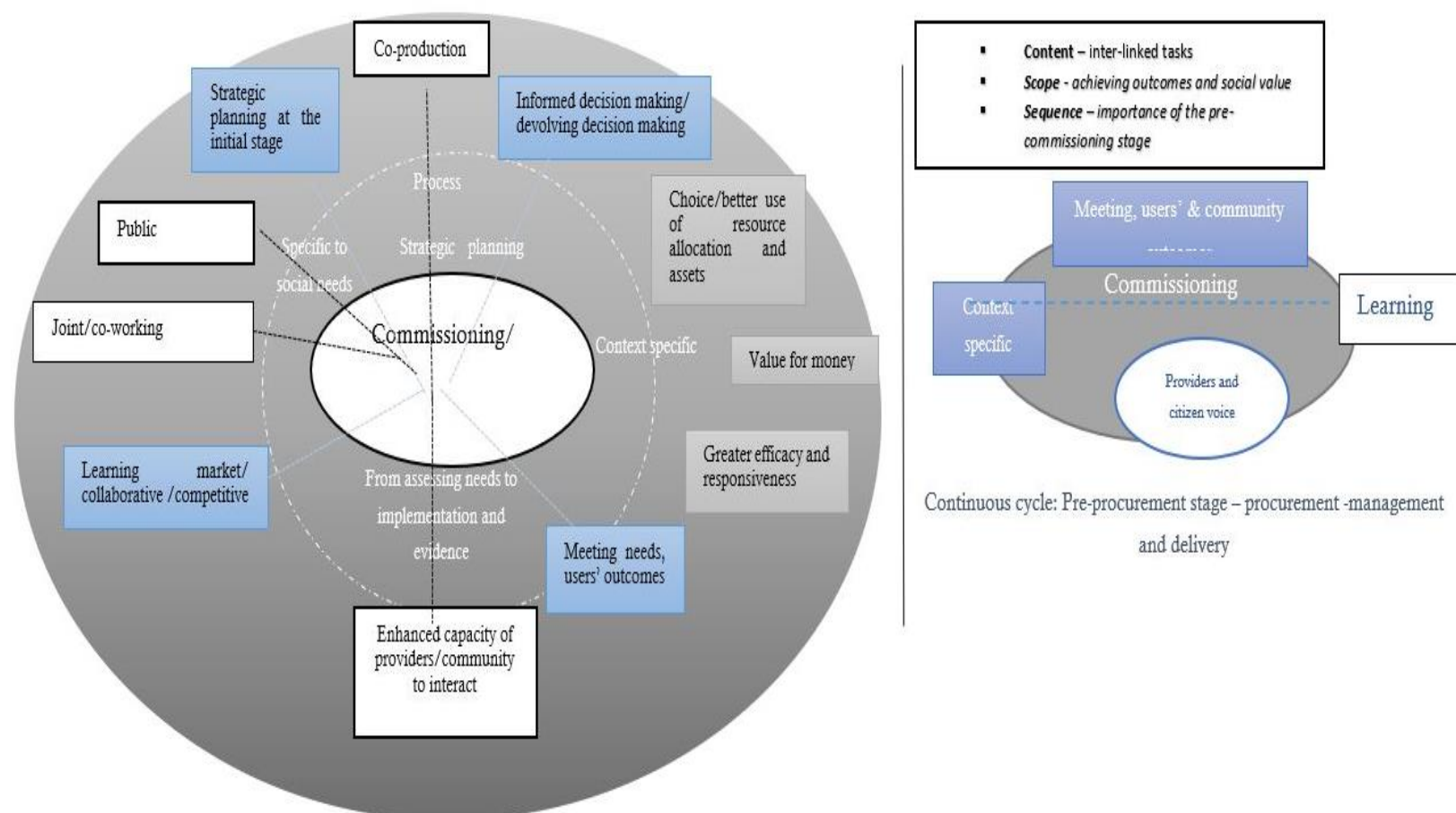
Based on the conceptual framework provided below, the study outlines the main features and rationales for commissioning in Figure 2.1. It outlines the content, scope and sequence of the commissioning process stages and the rationales to acting on it at various levels. In terms of the content of the commissioning process, it brings together the central core functions that characterise the strategic, cyclical process of the commissioning process. It schematically emphasizes the interlinked tasks characterizing the process and the contextual factors at the core of implementing contractual commissioning in the service provision. A significant part of the conceptual framework is the scope and rationales determining institutional funding authorities to

undertake it. The policy objectives mainly focus on better resource allocation, value for money, meeting service needs, and providing quality outcomes and social value. It increases choice and opens the services to competitive, innovative solutions and providers. The aims are to achieve better outcomes and value and place at the centre of decision making the citizen's needs. It is an opportunity to better inform the decision making by learning from the market on the user needs and priorities.

The framework as well points out the importance of the whole commissioning process. The sequence of the task of the commissioning process is essential. The good commissioning process requires attention to engagement throughout the entire cycle—the pre-commissioning stage and the interaction with the stakeholders before going to the procurement stage of the services. The early stages tasks of the commissioning – assessing needs and design of the services together with stakeholders (among others, citizens and providers of services) can be a valuable stage of learning from the market and drawing a better procurement process and delivery of the services.

The conceptual framework points out more innovative engagement mechanisms that characterise the commissioning process, such as co-working approaches between the actors involved in the process. Core values mechanisms have been adopted gradually into co-production and partnership for a more personalised service provision approach.

Figure 2.1 Core features and rationales of commissioning



Source: Researcher's elaboration on the literature (Colgan et al., 2015; Open Public Services, 2011; Murray, 2009; Hunter, 2019; Carson et al., 2010).

2.3.3 Commissioning: from the traditional to a cooperative model

According to a 2019 report on public service transformation by Benjamin Taylor and Garath Symonds, the commissioning approach to public service delivery has shifted from the traditional public service delivery to outcome-based commissioning and, further, to asset-based commissioning. Moreover, in Field and Miller's (2017) view, this transition of commissioning from its conventional embryonic form to a collaborative commissioning approach focused on outcomes and a commissioning strategy that starts not with needs but with assets represents a paradigm shift.

Numerous streams of scientific literature highlight the importance of the commissioning process and its relevance in a co-production logic. A dimension of the commissioning models growing in significance is the “partnership and collaborative approach across the different stages of the commissioning process” (Colgan et al., 2015, p. 25), embracing terms such as *co-production* in the commissioning cycle. It presents, at its core, a more relational dimension, revealing an increase in the power of local communities and people within the commissioning process (Field and Miller, 2017). Collaborative approaches to commissioning are becoming increasingly more common (Colgan et al., 2015), although they remain fragmented.

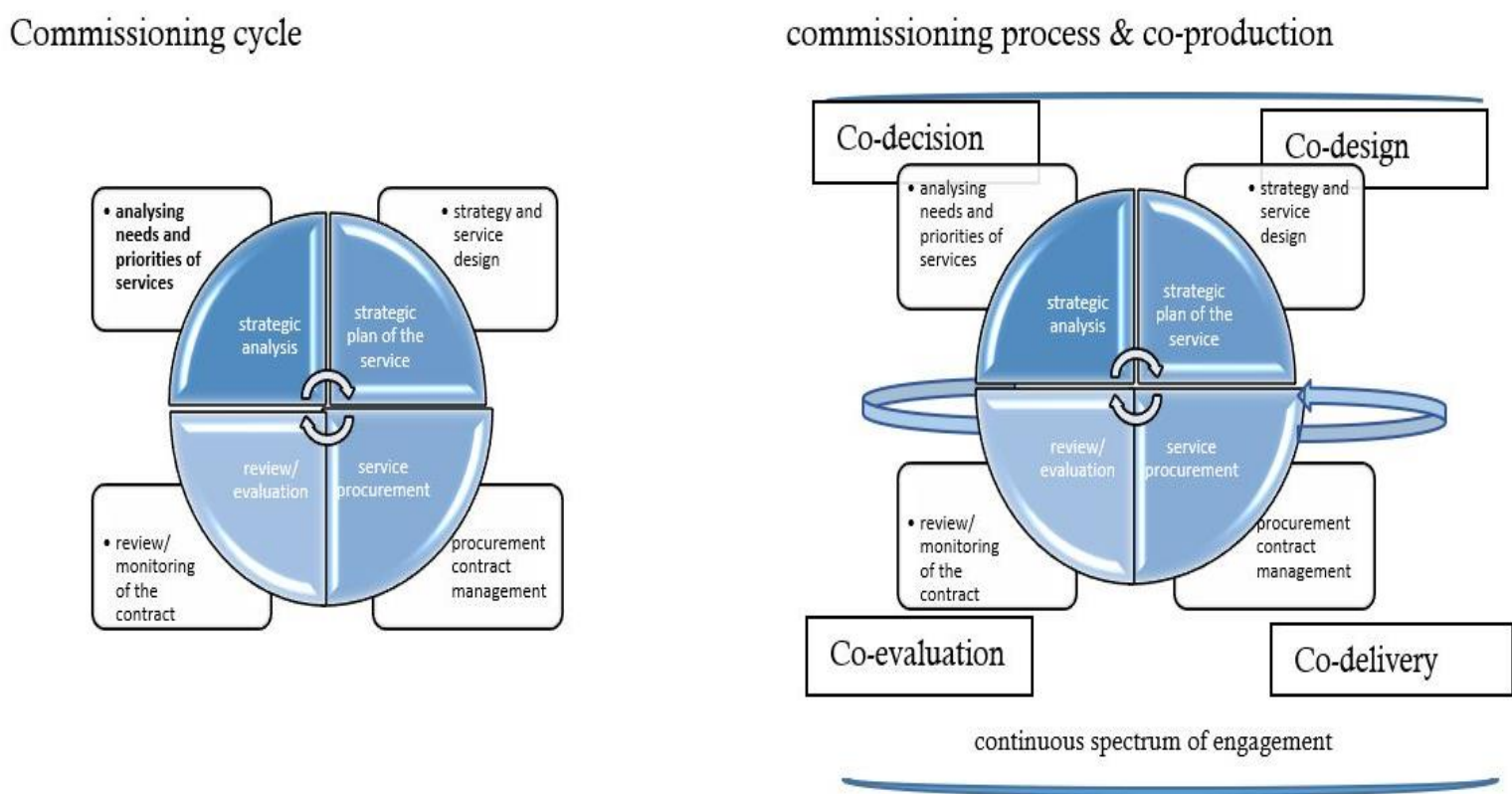
The following definitions present some crucial dimensions that delineate the limits of the term *commissioning co-production*. The term has often been approached with a specific focus on the relationship between the users and the community co-production process to achieve ‘better outcomes’ (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013; Boyle and Harris, 2009). Co-production is defined as professionals and citizens making better use of each other’s assets, resources, and contributions to achieve more beneficial outcomes or improved efficiency. This definition recognises that the users and the broader community can contribute to the public services provided to improve outcomes. It also shows that “the production and consumption of many services are inseparable” and “the quality of a service depends upon close interaction between the customer and provider” (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013, p. 1). Bovaird and Loeffler also point out that co-production commissioning is “co-creating public value through the achievement of outcome improvement in public services” (2019, p. 251).

The NEF (2014, p. 6) places commissioning for outcomes into a co-production system and highlights that such a system acts as a support “to meet people’s needs and promote well-being for all”. Accordingly, it involves “working with local people and providers collaboratively to maximise the value of money across the social, environmental and economic bottom line”.

The core values of the NEF approach are co-production, partnership, prevention, needs analysis and person-centred service (NEF, 2014). The NEF argues for adopting an approach that enables a shift from conventional commissioning to asset-based commissioning. It is focused on the commissioning for outcomes approach, enabling co-production and the promotion of social value. The NEF provides an approach to make the best of the SVA, using outcome-based commissioning in tandem with the concept of social value. There are several phases in the commissioning cycle; these involve (i) insight (needs and priorities); (ii) planning (co-producing an outcomes framework that reflects local needs); and (iii) improving delivery (monitoring and evaluating the social, economic and environmental value, and assessing the co-produced service).

The following figure (Figure 2.2) highlights a paradigm shift in the commissioning process towards a co-production logic. It is a comparative perspective from the traditional commissioning to a collaborative approach. The co-production approach emphasizes the commitment to continuous engagement and realizing outcomes collaboratively. It plays a critical role in the aspect of working together – co-decision, co-design, co-delivery and co-evaluation.

Figure 2.2 The commissioning process in a co-production logic



Source: Researcher’s interpretation of the literature

Field and Miller (2017, p. 89) point out that NEF outlines seven shifts to move from conventional to asset-based commissioning: i) from buying very tightly-defined services and activities to commissioning for economic, environmental and social outcomes; ii) from short-term efficiencies to promoting long-term value creation; iii) from being led by needs and deficits to needs and assets; iv) from being hierarchical and paternalistic to employing co-produced commissioning, with the expectation that organisational suppliers will begin to co-produce their services; v) moving away from over-specified services, asking organisational

suppliers and people using services to come up with ideas to meet the outcomes; vi) from being rigid and inflexible to iterative and adaptive to the needs and assets of local people; and vii) from being competitive and siloed to collaborating with varied actors, including organisational suppliers and local people. Such shifts require “new structured governance models and contracting models, collectively working towards shared outcomes rather than competing or working in isolation” (NEF, 2014, p. 45). It is not just about public agencies, but all organisations supporting locals and contributing to people’s well-being are considered critical to effective commissioning. The NEF’s (2014, p. 17) approach aims to achieve VfM in public spending and promote well-being by enabling a collaborative working framework between the general public and service providers. It seeks to maximise the value created by public spending across the social, environmental and economic sectors by supporting people’s needs and achievements in a co-production framework of relationships.

Field and Miller (2017, pp. 68-69) differentiate the different stages in the evolution of commissioning from a traditional to a more collaborative approach, naming this process “asset-aware commissioning”. The embryonic commissioning model is based on passive service users and fails to engage communities and the public in decision-making. Usually, the suppliers consult their service users while delivering the service outcomes, but organisational commissioners decide. The outcome-based commissioner has a more commercial approach that treats service users as customers and recognises the value of telling commissioners their needs directly. As such, this model is more based on satisfaction and choice.

The following table (Table 2.2) outlines the shifts from the traditional conventional commissioning towards a more innovative type of commissioning. It schematically provides the general shifts that the commissioning process had in the provision of the public sector. It looks at shifts in focus, how outcomes are produced, and the decision-making and commissioning process. The current predominant model is the outcome-focused commissioning, which embeds outcomes to a large scale. However, this commissioning model is limited in terms of promoting engagement with beneficiaries citizens, communities, and providers of services. Field and Miller (2017) argue for a model of asset commissioning for outcomes. In their model, the “active roles that people and communities and a wide range of organisations involved in co-commissioning and co-producing outcomes” contribute to the public services and the improvement in outcomes. In defining this form of interaction, they use the term *co-commissioning networks*. Such networks involve an extensive range of stakeholders (e.g., people, communities and organisational stakeholders). The approach is helpful as it recognises the diversity of roles involved in the commissioning process, not just users and communities. They argue that asset-aware commissioning both values and makes greater use of people’s lived experiences by involving them in all aspects of commissioning, even where commissioners still make the final decisions. The

process focuses on achieving a broader range of cross-sector outcomes by making active use of a broader range of assets, along with increased involvement of the suppliers in the commissioning process and more consultation with commissioners.

Table 2.2 From conventional to asset-aware commissioning

Commissioning model	Conventional commissioning		
	Embryonic commissioning	Outcome focused commissioning	Asset-aware commissioning
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ad hoc use of single sector outcomes. - Service centric - Procuring best value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs and sophisticated use of outcomes, some of which are cross-sector. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs plus full use of outcomes, of which many are cross-sector. - Within-sector and more cross-sector use of organisational assets.
Outcomes perceived to be produced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Solely produced through services procured from within sector organisations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Produced through services mostly procured from within sector organisations and sometimes by closely linked sectors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Produced by conventional services procured from within-sector organisations and closely linked sectors, sometimes incorporating explicitly the assets of people and communities.
Decision -making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People, communities, organisational suppliers and other sectors' organisational commissioners not involved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited supplier and some consultation of people, communities and other sectors' commissioners. - Organisational commissioners decide. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People, communities and other cross-sector organisational commissioners fully and suppliers partly consulted. - Organisational commissioners decide
Commissioning process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Solely centralised, wide-area commissioning. - organisation-centred bid process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partially developed multi-level commissioning but little or no devolution. - wider range of organisation and conventional practice-centred commissioning processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fully developed multi-level commissioning but little devolution. - Use of people's and communities' assets bolted on to a wide range of conventional practice centric commissioning processes.

Source: Field and Miller (2017, p. 73).

2.4 A review of the social value: a conceptual framework

2.4.1 Conceptual underpinnings – unpacking the social value concept.

Social element (the social character of social value)

The word *social* is a concept that describes society, and when we talk about society, it is an ambiguous term. According to Giddens (1987, p. 32), it can mean social association or social interaction in general, or it can mean a delimited overall social system.

Along with the emergence of socialism after 1850, according to Eley (2002, p. 21), the meaning of social changed. It changed from meaning just “a common system of institutions and relationships in which the people lived and started to imply a desirable contrast to the emergent form of capitalism”. It came to mean an idea of society within a framework of cooperation instead of individual competition.

It introduced the perspective that a better society could not be achieved, in terms of freedom, social inequalities and social justice, unless a society based on private property was replaced by one based on social control and the ownership of the society. Eley (2002) points out that social democracy, post-1848, came to signify “not just the most radical forms of parliamentary government but also to extend democratic precepts to society at large”, including organisation of the economy through a socialist economic policy, that is, one based on cooperation, public ownership, socialisation of the production and planning, as well as industrial democracy (Eley, 2002, pp. 21-22).

Barman (2016, p. 7), when discussing the meaning of social value, pointed out that the social dimension can refer to: i) a distinct social space; ii) a ‘third place’ realm in society, involving autonomous, voluntary interactions among individuals and groups called civil society, as separate from the economy and government; iii) a particular orientation of an action (e.g. social welfare); iv) action with the positive intent of beneficial consequences for the well-being of others (social networks, social capital); and v) the organisational efforts traditionally fulfilled by the government but also by private actors, like non-profit organisations, to improve the lives of individuals, communities and society in general (e.g., social welfare).

The social value generated by action requires measurement. One challenge this measurement process raises is the information asymmetry which characterises many commonly recognised social goods. Barman (2016) highlights that even if a consensus is reached about the meaning of social value, gauging the amount of social good an organisation produces remains difficult.

Value element (value character of social value)

The term *value* and its meaning are contested. Two types of value commonly found in the literature are value in use and value in exchange. The value refers to “the regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth, or usefulness of something”, which is a “relational concept; both the object to be valued and an evaluator are necessary preconditions for value to exist” (Habets et al., 2014. p. 3). It could refer to the material or monetary worth, which is an economic perspective.

Habets et al. (2014) raise two further questions concerning the concept of social value:

- “Is this intervention valuable for society?” suggesting there is a need to estimate whether it will benefit society, and
- “Will society value this intervention?” which considers the emotional attitude society holds.

Value can refer to either the “possession of criteria of worth (or quality) or the assessment of an entity’s merit” (Barman, 2016, pp. 9, 10); consequently, it refers not only to what counts but also to how it can be calculated. In a similar vein, Ormiston and Seymour (2011, p. 127) noted that “value is linked with exchanges and perceptions of worth”. The common understanding of value, according to Westall (2009, p. 3), is that it refers either to:

(i) Economic value, i.e., referring to some measure of the worth of what is created or desired by productive activity. Westall points out that the “approach aligns with metrics such as social return on investment (SROI), or the need for evidence of ‘added value’. Additionally, only certain kinds of outcome are relevant or ‘social’” (p. 6); or

(ii) An individual or group belief about what is right that guides the action. It represents a values-driven approach, concerned with motivation, finding ways to live values, and determines the processes by which activities are done or decided. Nevertheless, this area has received little attention and is weakly articulated or shown through evidence.

2.4.2 Social value creation and organisational models

According to Kroeger and Weber (2014, p. 518), the social construct is yet to be defined in a manner capable of achieving a shared understanding. It needs attention to what creating social value means due to its intangible nature, which does not allow comparability across different socio-economic and institutional contexts. They argue for a new conceptualisation of the social element as a social intervention that benefits society's disadvantaged categories.

Lautermann (2013) discusses the ambiguity and vagueness of the term *social value creation* and explores the absence of an agreed definition of the social dimension of entrepreneurial value creation. He specifically points out the lack of ethical substantiation in discussing the term. Moreover, Lautermann delves into the social entrepreneurship literature to consider the “dichotomies between social vs business” (pp. 187-188, 199). He questions the everyday discourse of solving social problems and maximising social value, which does not reveal an ethical dimension but applies (neo-) classical, utilitarian or traditional economic thinking to societal issues. According to the author, social value refers to creating benefits or reductions in costs for society.

Streams of research on organisational effectiveness and social value creation instead focus on social value as the product of organisational activity. According to Barman (2016), companies are increasingly taking on roles as social actors, as part of the community, under the so-called “caring capitalism” umbrella, which attempts to produce economic gains and a more sustainable society (pp. 2-3). The author notes that it is a departure from the traditional social division of labour, as social purpose organisations include traditional non-profit groups and types of actors that incorporate a social purpose as a strategy to reach a competitive advantage (pp. 2-4).

Choi (2015, p. 261) states that each sector has a different organisational form or business model typology, each driven by its motivations. In principle, it could be the motivational value or a specific set of social values that motivates the organisations in their actions. Furthermore, social values at the organisational level can be prioritised to clarify one's philanthropic decision-making (Whitman, 2008, p. 425). Traditionally, the value produced by businesses lies in the wealth produced for shareholders and customers (Moore, 2000, pp. 186-187), and its primary role is to maximise their economic returns (Choi, 2015, p. 261). By contrast, traditionally, the voluntary sector, referred to as the not-for-profit or third sector, has “often expanded to the areas where the private and public sector fails to address social problems adequately” (Choi, 2015, p. 261). The public sector aims to address collective social benefits, and the voluntary sector focuses on its socially mandated missions.

According to Choi (2015, p. 262), the voluntary sector is primarily focused on creating social value. These transformative aims, which are social by nature and align with social purpose, distinguish this sector from the private sector. Social entrepreneurship literature argues that a social impact is a primary purpose of establishing social enterprises. They prioritise promoting social value and development instead of capturing economic value (Jiao, 2011, p. 139). Ormiston and Seymour (2011, p. 131) propose a framework for a deeper understanding of the value created in the context of social entrepreneurship and beyond. The authors argue that value creation requires an integrated strategy to align and recalibrate the mission, objectives, strategy and resources through entrepreneurial adjustment (e.g., review and reflection, with important implications for value creation).

Thus, traditionally, the voluntary sector's value is not connected to its ability to attract revenue or act as a business within a strategic market of clients competing for resources. The organisation's values and its mission are the parameters that define its performance. How it produces value "is to define and achieve valuable missions defined regarding the achievement of social objectives" (Moore, 2000, p. 195). The mission statements of VSOs have social at their core, seeking to alleviate a specific social ill. However, the market they are operating in is an environment in which donors, the general public and the government make commitments to the public purpose (Moore, 2000, p. 200).

An important aspect that differentiates these organisations is their ability to respond adequately to the "defining source of revenue – be it, clients, taxpayers, charitable sources and other funding alternatives" (Moore, 2000, pp. 184-185). For instance, in the current market of service procurement, organisations compete for the same revenues. This funding model, based on competition for resources, adds pressure to the voluntary sector. In turn, this pressure forces them to reshape their traditional mindset and acquire the business models and tools that have traditionally characterised the business world (e.g., efficiency, effectiveness and performance). It requires them to be more accountable and prove the value of their work and improve through a commitment to performance management and innovation (Cox et al., 2012). The new context asks for resilience and changes to traditional views in order to survive the market competition. This context has created new organisational strategies. It has increasingly seen blurred boundaries between the profit and not-for-profit sectors and a growing number of hybrids organisations (e.g., social enterprises). According to Moore (2000, p. 189), a unifying factor across all sectors requires strategies to remain purposeful and effective. Traditionally, the strategy formulation of a for-profit organisation has been broader to enhance stakeholder wealth and revenues and distinct from the government and voluntary sectors. By contrast, their strategies sought to achieve their social mission and find better ways to accomplish it. The place of the social dimension might differ from one organisation to another. It can play the social mission (non-profit) role or a

legitimising field of action and contribute to decision-making (public sector). It can play a purposive strategy for competitive advantage (for profit).

According to Whitman (2008, p. 420), there are two different types of values: personal universal human values and organisational values. What distinguishes one from the other is the type of goal or motivation that the value expresses. Also, “how an enterprise is run and how it relates to its constituents within and without the organisation” (Whitman, 2008, p. 420). In his view, a working definition of social value would be that such value is “an enduring, normative belief that describes a preferred mode of social conduct or end-state in society and justifies action to attain or sustain a preferred social order” (Whitman, 2006, p. 137).

An extensive literature on social entrepreneurship focuses explicitly on creating social value (Hill et al., 2010; Jiao, 2011; Choi, 2015; Mair and Marti, 2006; Young, 2006). This concept of social value is often linked to the role of the social entrepreneur’s mission to create and sustain social value. Social entrepreneurship is considered a means to reach a social objective – a social mission-based orientation (Jiao, 2011, p. 133).

These social enterprises operate as for-profit social purpose organisations with hybrid nature, with social impact as their primary purpose. It has been recognised that their innovative ability is to promote social value as opposed to capturing economic value, while their social mission is positively linked to social value creation and the support of social value (Jiao, 2011; Choi, 2015; Mair and Marti, 2006; Young, 2006). The main objective of social enterprises is to create social value. However, they must also generate economic value to support their social value-creating activities through entrepreneurial endeavours rather than pure philanthropy (Mendoza-Abarca and Mellema, 2016, pp. 101, 103). Therefore, the creation of economic value is a means to an end (Ormiston and Seymour, 2011; Mendoza-Abarca and Mellema, 2016).

The social entrepreneur has a role as an agent of social change, adopting a “mission to create and sustain social value in a prominent way” (Jiao, 2011, p. 132) and solving social problems. The social mission is an objective that motivates organisations to create social value, which stands in contrast to its economic purpose. Such entrepreneurs concentrate primarily on social value creation, “which benefits people whose urgent needs are not being met by other means” (Young, 2006, p. 56). The primary distinguishing features of the social entrepreneur, found in the literature, are i) having a social mission; ii) being innovative; and iii) having a market orientation (Maas and Grieco, 2017, p. 111).

Seeing social entrepreneurship broadly as a process (Mair and Marti, 2006, p. 37), it “involves an innovative use and resources combination to pursue opportunities to catalyse social change and address social needs”.

2.4.2.1 Social value creation - social or economic value?

According to Emerson (2003, p. 43), there is a need to move beyond the traditional belief of separating the social value from the economic value. He introduces the concept of the blended value proposition, highlighting that purely financial or social values are impossibilities, that all values are inseparable blends, and that, consequently, both dimensions should be maximised simultaneously. Therefore, along with the so-called blended value approach, economic, social and environmental performances are expected to be simultaneously maximised within a single organisation or community (Emerson, 2003; Nicholls, 2009).

Quelin et al. (2017, p. 7) have pointed out that rather than attempting to juxtapose private and social benefits, the focus has been on conceptions of value that attempt to distinguish between social and commercial value creation. The focus has been on the positive changes in the subjective well-being of specific population targets (Kroegeer and Weber, 2014) and the impact on societal groups at the bottom of the pyramid (Ansari et al., 2012).

By looking at the traditional economics and studies of management, it emphasises the notion of economic value as being focused on value creation at the level of the individual financial organisation, alongside the principle of its maximisation in terms of the firm and consumer surplus (i.e., the difference between willingness to pay and costs) (Quelin et al., 2017, p. 7). According to Kelly et al. (2002, p. 8), “the value creation happens when a business uses resources (labour and intellectual, physical and financial capital) to meet individual customer preferences, and that is signalled through the price mechanism”.

The literature on hybrid organisations, social enterprises, and VSOs has increasingly turned its attention to broader conceptualisations of value (Quelin et al., 2017, p. 7). This goes beyond the organisation’s interest in accruing value to wider society, including stakeholders. The author noted that public administration literature had thought mainly of value in attaining defined preferences emerging from collective decision-making, the satisfaction of particular societal needs and the explicit attainment of public policy objectives. By citing the work of Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2011), the author also noted that public management studies focus increasingly on the “value implications in terms of social welfare outcomes from public-private sector interaction, and the crucial impact of actors (government, voluntary sector organisations) possessing broader concerns beyond profitability” (Quelin et al., 2017, p. 7).

There is a growing emphasis in public management examining how distinct organisational forms which involve the public or private operation of public services can create public value, defined as the tangible benefits to community targets minus the costs in the process (Kelly et al., 2002). The government’s

stewardship role in maximising public added value has been long recognised but differs, to an extent, from the private value made up of the benefits of action against the costs (including the opportunity costs of the resources involved). It includes multiple objectives with no single bottom line, and the utility produced by the government is available to any citizen. This idea of public value has been implemented as a measure of organisational performance, and increasingly public agencies are using performance outcomes to report success in achieving public objectives.

In public management literature, social value appears as a parameter and driver of organisational performance. The idea of social value creation in management studies and public value creation in public management converge, given that each type of organisation (i.e., public, for-profit and non-profit) can generate benefits for well-defined population targets (Bryson et al., 2014). At the level of strategic management studies, the tendency is to reconcile rather than juxtapose the tension between social and economic returns (Margolis and Walsh, 2003).

Another term used in the literature is that of *shared value*. The interdependence between business and society proposed by Porter and Kramer (2006) envisions companies drawing from the competitive systems of resources (e.g., economic, social, environmental) to carry out their activities and returning at the end of the production process value to the competitive system. According to the authors, the creation of shared value is linked by “a set of policies and practices that enhance a company’s competitiveness while improving the economic and social conditions of the communities” (p. 6). The dichotomy between private and social gain is reconciled by focusing on stakeholder wealth, which simultaneously enhances sustainability in meeting social and environmental criteria (Hart, 2005).

These trends in the literature are particularly relevant for the voluntary sector. Such organisations are usually dependent on material support from a range of investors, including government institutions or other parties, who expect accountability (Nicholls, 2009). Thus, knowing how they are performing in terms of maximising their social impact and comparing with their competitors is essential (Lingane and Olsen, 2004, p. 124).

2.5 Commissioning/Procurement and SVA

2.5.1 Social value procurement

This section provides a perspective on the global shifts contributing to the overall debate.

There is a growing convergence between local contracting authority policy objectives, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and their role in delivering global goals (Battle, 2019). The global agenda was further

supported by the motion passed by the LGA (Local Government Association) at their annual conference in support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2019. Social value could be an essential means for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals from an international stakeholder's perspective. Other goals of the UN are to promote public procurement practices that are sustainable and ensure sustainable consumption and production (e.g., goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns).

The terms *sustainable procurement* or *social value in procurement* aim for similar objectives and involve similar responsibilities. In 2010, the Sustainable Procurement Task Force defined sustainable procurement as “a process where organisations meet their needs for goods, services and works in a way that achieves value for money. It can be done, on a whole life basis, by generating benefits not only to the organisation but also to society and economy” (HMRC, 2010, p. 2).

EU policy discourse has also been an essential vehicle for formalising social value through the Europe 2020 Strategy. It reaffirms the importance of public procurement to “foster the transition to an efficient economy” (COM 2020, 2010) and the principle that the public authorities can contribute to the Europe 2020 strategic goals by using their ‘purchasing power to procure goods and services with a higher societal value’. Other strategic directives, such as the European Commission Directive (2014) on the adjudication of concession contracts (2014/23/EU), are essential. Within this framework, the criterion for awarding public contracts is no longer the lowest price but the “most advantageous tender in terms of economic, social and environmental benefits, taking into account the entire life-cycle costs of the good, service or work” (European Parliament, 2011). The European Procurement Directive 2014/23/EU shaped the social value content of the UK public commissioning, which aims at obtaining high-quality goods and services to deliver VfM for the public purpose. Since 18 April 2016, the EU has put new reforms and legal rules. These require EU countries to transpose onto their national laws various new directives supporting the changes (e.g. Directive 2014/24/EU on public procurement; Directive 2014/23/EU on the award of concession contracts).

2.5.2 The legal framework created by SVA

The implementation of the SVA, covered by a procurement policy note (10/12) issued by the Crown Commercial Service on 20th December 2012, began on 31st January 2013; it was last reviewed in 2015 by Lord Young. The Act maintains the previous requirements made by the Statutory Guidance on Best Value, issued in 2011, which states that best value for public authorities must make arrangements to secure the continuous improvement of its functions and observe a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The new requirement of the local authorities was that they should “discharge the duty of best value, in a way that embraces social value” (BSSEC, 2012, p. 4).

The Act regulates the procurement and commissioning practices of the local contracting bodies in England and Wales where, under the law, the commissioners must consider:

- how what is proposed to be procured might improve the economic, social, and environmental well-being of the relevant area;
- how, in conducting the process of procurement, it might act to secure that improvement (Section 1(3), Social Value Act, 2012), and
- whether consultation on social value is needed (Section 1(7), Social Value Act, 2012).

The local authorities (contracting bodies) subject to this duty are those local bodies that are subject to the Public Contracts Regulations (Public Contracts Regulations, 2015) (Allaway and Brown, 2019, p. 42). This requirement applies to the pre-procurement stage (Section 1(1) Social Value Act, 2012). However, it may be overlooked should it be impractical in certain circumstances (Section 1(8) Social Value Act, 2012). The provision of the Act applies to procurement practices in service delivery and affects how local contracting authorities, government departments and the NHS commission goods and services (Butler, 2011). The Act applies to social service delivery contracts, not goods or public works contracts, although each local contracting authority may use it flexibly. The Act began as a private member’s bill introduced on 30th June 2010 by Chris White, Conservative MP for Warwick and Leamington, and it received government support (HM Government, 2011).

Other laws related explicitly to the SVA include the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and the Local Contracting Authority Act 1999 (Allaway and Brown, 2019, p. 43). The SVA also sits alongside the public sector equality duty in the Equality Act 2010 (Local Contracting Authority Association, 2020).

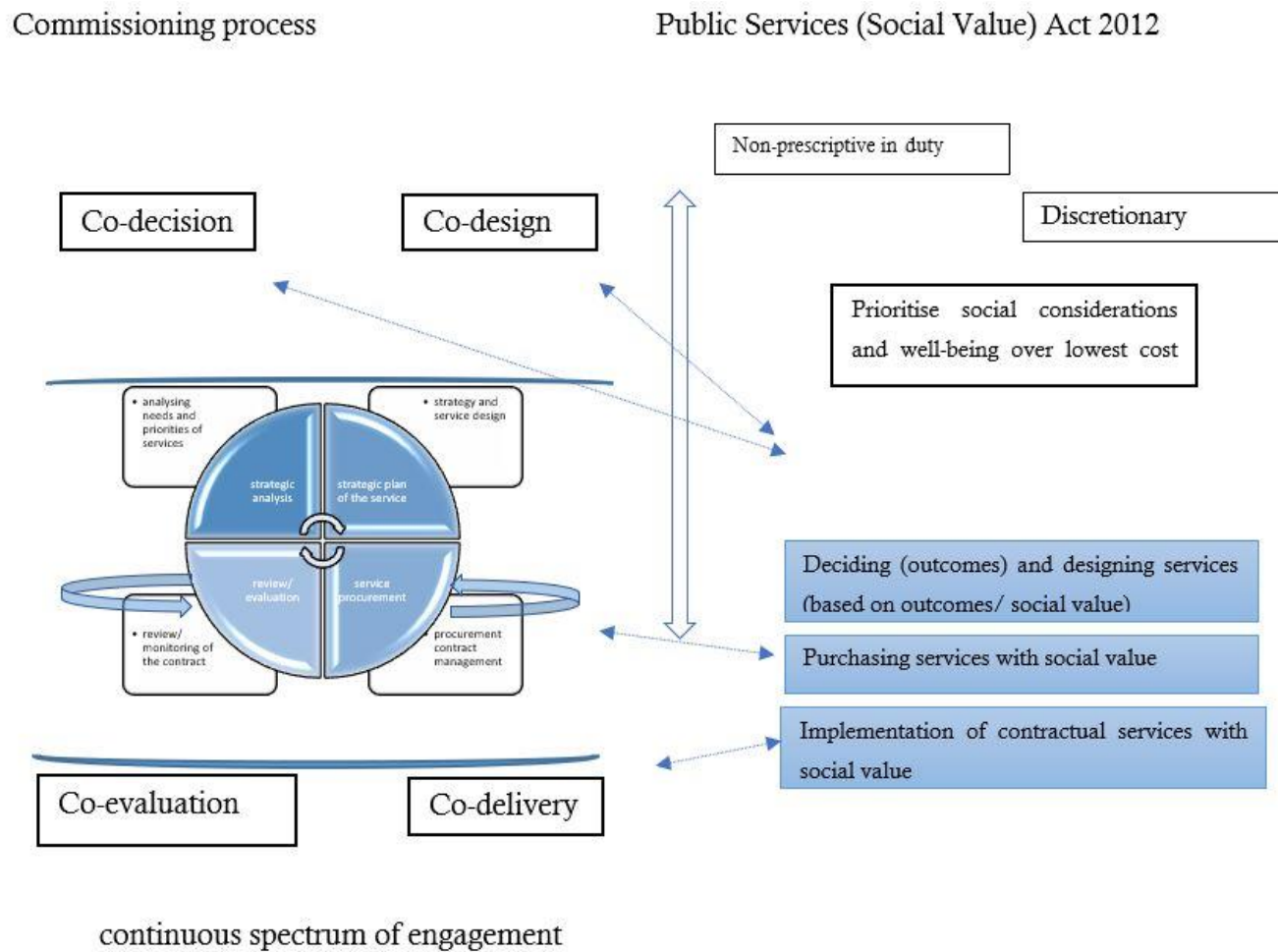
Within the existing regulation and legislation, Lowe and Plimmer (2019, pp. 60-61) have shown that the intent of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 was to achieve broader and better social benefits for communities. The regulations allow for a light touch approach in some sectors, which means that provided the processes are transparent, it allows the design of a procurement process suiting a specific context.

The following figure (Figure 2.3) outlines a perspective on the position of the SVA policy and its relation to the commissioning process. It sets in key features the characteristics of the policy. It is recognised for its non-prescriptive nature. Also, its broad aims encompass the social, environmental and economic benefits of

service contracted. The policy encourages new thinking in the commissioning for outcomes. It creates a more sustainable supply chain, prioritising the broader improvement of the social, economic, and environmental issues and well-being of the beneficiaries and communities through the services procured and delivered.

Along with enacting the policy, there is an encouragement to consider the engagement mechanisms in the commissioning for outcomes. It asks commissioners to consider whether consultation is needed in the commissioning process to improve and secure that improvement in the local community where the services are contracted. This study raises the attention that the fundamental focus that SVA opens up is the democratic engagement and the pre-procurement stage of the commissioning process. Thus, a fundamental focus of the SVA is the pre-procurement stage. A procurement policy note (Cabinet Office, 2012) related to the SVA defines pre-procurement in the commissioning process as the design of services occurs, where service specifications are developed, and engagement with partners, stakeholders and potential providers occurs. As such, at the pre-procurement stage of procuring services, the local public authorities in England and Wales (including all local authorities and the National Health Service) should consider whether to undertake any consultation as to the matters that fall under subsection (3) – clause 1(7). The SVA does not set out who should be consulted in pre-procurement but recognises the importance of consultation from the early stage of designing policies, programmes and services.

Figure 2.3 The commissioning and social value policy



Source: Researcher's interpretation (based on the commissioning cycle model NEF, 2014; SVA, 2012; NCVO, 2017).

Among the different investment models, commissioning for social value “is a new type of outcome focus approach that encourages commissioners and service providers to consider the wider aggregate outcomes and benefits of services, including social, environmental and economic outcomes” (Colgan et al. 2015, p. 19). In essence, “it enables local authorities to i) create a socially-purposed supply chain; and ii) have an effective way of promoting community inclusion and targeting disadvantaged group”.

The new political narrative shifts the discourse regarding the commissioning cycle to the importance of value. It encourages scrutiny of the needs and priorities and the employment of an outcome framework, encompassing outcomes that matter and having long-term value at the core of its delivery (NEF, 2014). Commissioners in asset-based areas should explicitly promote social value. The SVA supports the Asset-Based Area approach to social value. Across all their commissioning activities, it requires public authorities

to regard economic, social, and environmental well-being. Prevention of social ills is an essential part of achieving social value. Asset-Based Areas make social value central to all their commissioning processes (Field and Miller, 2017).

2.5.3 Defining social value in a commissioning context

This section highlights the meanings assigned to social value in the commissioning context.

Of most relevance, Chris White, the MP behind the enactment of the SVA, explained that “We mean ‘value’ not in its narrow [financial] sense but in its real sense – recognising the importance of social, environmental and economic well-being across our communities and in our lives”. Moreover, a Cabinet Office report, published in 2010, states that “social value encompasses a broad concept of value by incorporating social, environmental and economic costs and benefits. It means taking into account the direct effects of interventions, and the wider effects on other areas of the economy” (The Compact, HM Government Cabinet Office, p. 9).

In Wood and Leighton’s (2010, p. 20) view, social value refers to “wider non-financial impacts of programs, organisations and interventions, including the individuals and community’s well-being, social capital and the environment”. It also refers to long-term effects. The differentiation can also be found in the “inclusion of impact on people – their lives in an environment (Inspiring Impact, 2013) – at an individual and societal level, rather than solely on the economy or at fiscal level” (Morgan, 2015, p. 4). Social value has been described as “extra-financial value” and “can be understood as a collective term for assessing the relative value of social, economic and environmental outcomes most often in the context of resources allocation decisions” (Cox et al., 2012; Morgan, 2015, p. 4).

There is recognition that social value has no single authoritative definition; it remains a work in progress concerning commissioning since it “lacks a clear theoretical and methodological base” (McLaren, 2011).

Thus, the NAVCA’s social value report by McLaren (2011, p. 5) introduces social value as a contrast to public value theory. McLaren notes that social value was a concept derived partly from the notion of economic value-added, noting an emphasis on client/citizen co-production, in part from public value theory (McLaren, 2011, p. 6).

The conceptual terms of social impact and social value are often used interchangeably and, though they overlap, there are essential differences (Cox et al., 2012). Social impact is the impact or difference that activities make; they can be measured to assess how much impact has occurred (Morgan, 2015, p. 4). Social value is the value, financial or not, attributed to that change to the individual, society, the economy and the environment, often relative to its cost. In the views of Clark et al. (2004), social impact represents the portion of the total outcome achieved from an organisation's activities above and beyond what could have been expected, highlighting the creation of social value by distinguishing between outputs and outcomes (see also Grieco et al., 2015, p. 176). The social impact measurement suggests "a move away from an assessment purely focused on the impact of an intervention on the economy" (Morgan, 2015, p. 3). Traditionally, several approaches to measuring social impact, such as regular financial reports, focused on economic performance, though fewer innovation measurements incorporate environmental and social considerations (Antadze and Westley, 2012, p. 135).

The measurement of social impact is seen as a strategic parameter of understanding the extent to which the organisational social mission has been achieved. Consequently, it relates to organisational effectiveness. Assessing the social impact produced by a social enterprise can be helpful to improving internal management and obtaining funds (Grieco et al., 2015, p. 174). In the author's view, fulfilling a social mission raises the question of how these organisations impact society, so there is a need to understand if and how they are achieving their objectives and contributing to the well-being of society. For the organisations, demonstrating social value enables them to think about what they do, how they deliver, and the benefits. Mair and Marti (2006, p. 42) argue that aligning a mission with a measurable impact is key to developing "useful and meaningful measures that capture the impact of social entrepreneurship and reflect the objectives pursued". Therefore, as various streams of literature highlight, the measurement of impact becomes crucial to understanding how to improve the results. There are positive relationships between impact assessment and the level of innovation, the economic market orientation, the size of the organisation and their orientation to the impact measurement. The impact measurement is the final step in the value creation process (Ormiston and Seymour, 2011, p. 133).

Some features which coexist with social value measurement approaches (Mook et al., 2015) are i) the measurement of economic, monetary value with the social value of non-profit organisations (e.g., SROI has a positivist approach and uses proxies to measure and monetise the value of outcomes to create a social return on investment ratio); ii) the stakeholder approach (e.g., social accounting recognises that different stakeholder groups create social and economic value and attempts to assess their impact); iii) a social value measurement is an evidence-based approach (e.g., the determination of items based on their importance and measurability,

specifically, the difficulty in measuring the change in an organisation depends on several internal and external factors); and iv) the context matters and a central element in the success of evaluation is the context-sensitivity and adaptation (e.g., users priorities, political environment) (Antadze and Westley, 2012, p. 147). Social value raises the accountability of results to the stakeholders affected by the activity provided.

Factors impeding the measurement of social impact include:

- the confusion of defining what to report and how to measure what is to be reported (Nicholls, 2009, p. 758). It is difficult to grasp the social impact created by programmes and organisations entirely.
- the “main problem is not the measurement itself, but the conversion of qualitative data related to the achievement of a social mission into quantitative metrics” (Grieco et al., 2015, p. 175);
- the social innovation produced by the voluntary sector typically goes beyond financial value creation, and the current metrics of measurement are based on established economic models. The trends depend primarily on the investors’ decision-making that could be either looking at short-term interventions and tangible outcomes (Antadze and Westley, 2012, p. 148) or broader outcomes with an impact in the long term.

2.5.4 Social value approach: outcome vs process

There has been a shift from the traditional thinking about input and outputs, focusing on outcomes and a long-term vision of a programme’s interventions. The focus has moved to measuring outcomes and assessing organisational effectiveness. Outcomes have become organisational indicators of performance. An essential aspect of the difference between these organisations lies in “what constitutes and how one measures the value produced by different organisations” (Moore, 2000, p. 186).

At the core of commissioning, much of the discourse is driven by this focus on outcomes. The “outcome is one of the main aims of public services commissioning: improving citizens’ lives and their long-term prospects” (Carter et al., 2018, p. 4) in terms of health, well-being, education, or employment. Antadze and Westley (2012) refers to “outcomes regarding social innovation and is seen as a complex process, rather than a specific outcome in the forms of a product, service or behaviour”. Outcomes can vary widely, from local economic issues, economic growth, to providing jobs, reducing poverty or enhancing social inclusion.

In the commissioning and procurement process, the public authorities have focused on delivering VfM in public services. The concept of social value has mainly been defined within the context of social outcomes measurements, often referring to SROI as a tool for assessing it. According to Wood and Leighton (2010, pp. 19-20), in the UK, social value is mainly assessed against criteria deriving from the work of the SROI, which aims to encompass wider non-financial impacts of programmes, organisations and interventions. The social value in public sector commissioning and procurement is considered the extra-financial value (i.e., environmental, social value not reflected in traditional accounting). It is a collective term acknowledging the importance of social outcomes in decision-making, typically regarding resource allocation (Cox et al., 2012). It refers to two different aspects: i) the impact on people (individuals or groups), which might be financial or economic, but is often concerned with health or well-being; and ii) economic benefits, primarily for the government, that arise as a result of social change. However, there is not a clear definition of the additional benefits that this implies. In the view of Arvidson and Kara (2013, p. 5), social value evaluation broadly refers to “soft, intangible outcomes” and relates to the “effect activity has on communities and the environment”.

The outcomes could include the well-being of individuals and communities or social capital. These are typically described as ‘soft’ outcomes because they are difficult to quantify and measure. Taylor (2011, p. 778) prioritises personal relationships, trust and participation rather than consumption and focuses on creating and exchanging social value through relationships at the level of culture rather than economic value through contracts. The same author maps the different views onto the concept of well-being, which has been criticised for its individualised and market-orientated view on social provision. He argues that “well-being should be seen as a process, not simply an outcome, that it is relational and contextual and that, for users of welfare services, it cannot be understood independently of the social provisions of the welfare state” (p.779). The determinants of well-being are affective (e.g., the individual's happiness). They have positive action cognitive dimensions (e.g., positive experiences (self-efficacy)), which suggests that the notion of the individual rests on some critical assumptions about action or agency (Taylor, 2011, p. 783). Therefore, a reorientation of the goal of public policies from the economic utility to the assurance of greater well-being of the local community can be seen here.

However, social value’s public policy angle is market-led in commissioning contracts, and the idea of outcomes measurements is predominant.

Harlock (2014, p. 3) argues that the current system, highly regulated and under the pressure of austerity, leaves little room to consider the broader concept of social value as public sector financial accountability takes priority over other dimensions. In Westall’s view (2012), the concept of social value has implications beyond

simply measuring the outcomes of a project or organisation. The author highlights that, in theory, measuring what is prioritised by various stakeholders requires a complete examination of an organisation's social, environmental, and economic impact (i.e., intended and unintended, positive and negative). The definition of social value is highly contextual, requiring a holistic view to delve deeper into the results achieved and their implications. Social value depends on what is valuable in a particular time and place, explaining the different approaches in various contexts. Generally, however, of all those perspectives, the financial one dominates.

Outcomes-based commissioning emphasises the need to achieve measurable outcomes (Colgan et al., 2015, pp. 1-3). More recently, a new approach has emerged –assets-based commissioning (Field and Miller, 2017), where the commissioning process starts with assets rather than needs. Outcomes-based commissioning has emerged, based on payment by results, such as through a social impact bond (SIB), and focused on social outcomes. In broader terms, a SIB is “a partnership aimed at improving the social outcomes for a specific group of citizens or beneficiaries” (Carter et al., 2018, p. 7). A vital aspect promoted by this model is the nature of working together through the commissioning project by “coming together and jointly identifying and then jointly paying for the outcomes they hope to achieve” (Carter et al., 2018, p. 12), leading to a change in terms of better collaboration, prevention and innovation.

Field and Miller (2017) recognise that perceived and produced outcomes are different. The outcomes could be: i) solely delivered by services procured from within-sector organisations; ii) produced by services primarily obtained from within-sector organisations and sometimes from closely linked sectors; or iii) provided primarily by conventional services procured from within-sector organisations and closely linked sectors and sometimes incorporating the assets of people and communities explicitly. This last approach recognises the emergence of a broader set of outcomes that incorporate the needs and priorities, informed by the voice of the people and local communities, to drive social change.

Process approach –users, community and suppliers-based approach

Westall (2009, p. 8) highlights that, in a project of social value commissioning by NHS North West, 2009, the social value was defined as a process and outcome that was societally agreed by the collective needs of individuals who share common expectations. The goals were to increase social capital, well-being and entrepreneurialism. According to her, this definition is unclear and mixes up different values and models of action or outcome. Nevertheless, it does broaden the definition beyond the narrow economic conceptions.

According to his early work in 2006, Whitman (2008) noted that the individuals affected by the work of an organisation (e.g., a foundation) should be consulted. The rationale is that their values and priorities may differ from those that otherwise would be selected by a foundation or presumed by experts bidding for the foundation's work. It highlights the importance of the inclusion of the stakeholders in establishing a consensual meaning of social value, although it remains challenging to measure. Such engagement is ideal, although, because of the diversity of the participants in the discussion, consensus on a set of social values is unlikely to be easily achieved as each stakeholder may have different preferences. In Whitman's view, the role of deliberative participation is encouraged in any service delivery, and he argues that might be an opportunity to achieve the same.

The literature recognises the value of the stakeholder's voice and the local needs. In reviewing the voluntary sector literature, social value has various core features, including its subjective nature (Young, 2006, pp. 57-58). It captures the participants' real-life experiences and is being negotiated and contested between stakeholders. It is contingent and open to reappraisal, which means that it has context-dependent connotations. Therefore, the meaning of social value is mainly shaped by a subjective approach (at the individual, organisational or collective level) and changes according to the social needs of particular places and communities (Dobson, 2012, p. 4) because it depends on the subjective preferences of individuals (Young, 2006; Westall, 2009). Dobson (2012, p. 4) highlights how "defining social value remains a subjective business and changes, just as places and social needs change". These perspectives are helpful because they allow us to conclude that social value is dependent on its location.

Working from the perspective of a '*system approach*' (Raiden et al., 2019, p. 7) to consider social value provides a tool for understanding and examining interactions between the many components that comprise the entirety of the social value creation system. Two core features that enable social value creation within such a system are engagement and stakeholders. Understanding the value of the process, how the activities are delivered and who engages in its delivery are essential in understanding the social value creation processes and their benefits. Even so, some of those benefits are less immediately measurable, such as greater community cohesion and engagement (Boeger, 2017, p. 114).

2.6 An analytical framework for this study

2.6.1 Strategic action field (SAF)

The primary theoretical lens used in this study is the concept of SAF as presented by Fligstein and McAdam presented in *A Theory of Fields* (2012). For Fligstein and McAdam, a field is “a constructed meso-level social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another based on shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules of governing legitimate action in the field” (2012, p. 9; see also Laamanen and Skalen, 2015).

Essential insights on how to position a field can be found in Kluttz and Fligstein’s (2016) work on sociological field theory. Essentially, the actors in a social space (i.e., the field), a socially constructed arena, are “oriented towards one another over a particular issue or goal”. By being oriented towards one another, “those actors frame their actions and identities vis-à-vis one another (i.e., relationally)” and also “recognize (if not always follow) shared meanings, rules and norms that guide their interactions”. Moreover, “fields structure actors’ interests influence them to think and act by the rules and expectations of the field”. The actors have an “agentic capacity to accumulate resources and/or seek advantages vis-à-vis others”. The theory supports an understanding of the role of the human agent in determining stability or change (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). Actors exercise agency in two ways: i) by responding to their existential function of meaning-making (ordering the world meaningfully); and ii) by being social beings who need the cooperation of others (Fellows and Liu, 2017, p. 581). Individuals seek sociability, engage in meaning-making and construct their own identities through affiliation with others in the group (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, cited in Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). While agents have individual interests, these interests are defined by and negotiated with others within the field (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). This theory situates the institutional entrepreneur (i.e., a highly-skilled social actor who can help produce a field) within the broader SAF environment (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 109–110). In cases of emergence or transformation, such actors may help create a field (e.g., by convincing others to accept their cultural concept via an appeal that resonates with others’ identities or meaning).

SAFs are settings where collective action takes place (Sandfort and Moulton, 2015, p. 69). According to Kluttz and Fligstein (2016), SAF theory “places the most importance on understanding how actors, who occupy positions within a socially constructed order, relate to one another within that space”. In their view, the meso-level refers to the fact that “actors are taking each other into account in framing action”. The level

includes both individual and collective actors; thus, it can also be a group or network of organisations that interact by shared understandings, operating in the same locality or market.

Building on Fligstein and McAdam (2012, pp. 12–13), Kluttz and Fligstein (2016) point out that the boundaries of the field can shift according to the definition of the situation and the issues at stake, and that a field can alter due to shared understandings fashioned over time by members of that field. The authors stress four kinds of shared understandings:

i) the actors share a sense of what is at stake in the field. The interaction in the field happens “under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, its relationships and its rules” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, p. 3);

ii) the actors have a shared sense of the positions of others in the SAF (i.e., recognition of which actors in the field have power, who occupies which roles and why). There is an understanding of relationships; each actor occupies a specific function; they also know who is in which position (e.g., competitors), what is at stake;

iii) the actors have a shared understanding of the rules that guide what is considered legitimate action in the field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 9);

iv) the actors in specific positions within the field share interpretative frames (n.b., these frames may vary within the field). Individual and collective strategic actors adopt an interpretative frame to make sense of what others are doing.

SAF is structured with incumbent/challenger dynamics, with actors possessing various resource endowments and vying for advantage (Kluttz and Fligstein, 2016). There are power dynamics in play in the field, meaning that powerful actors operate as incumbents and challengers will arise (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011). The incumbents are secure in their power, are generally well-positioned and enjoy significant resource advantages to withstand the changing pressures/destabilising shocks to the stability of the field. They are more in control and are in influential positions, and they claim a disproportionate share of the materials and symbolic resources of the field (Kluttz and Fligstein, 2016). They also have a disproportionate ability to shape the rules and organisation of the field. By contrast, the challengers have less influence in the field of operation. Usually, they conform to the prevailing order of the field by taking what the system gives them, even though they can also usually articulate an alternative vision (Kluttz and Fligstein, 2016). However, they may struggle to shape the playing ground to their advantage. From this perspective, the actors’ positions in the field reflect their perceived actions and reactions (Fellows and Liu, 2017, p. 580). According to Pettinicchio (2013, p. 82), this

implies that actors may enter with different, perhaps conflicting, ways of understanding the goals and objectives of the policy community. Kluttz and Fligstein's (2016, p. 10) view is that "although they have incumbents and challengers who always compete, SAFs are not necessarily marked by extreme hierarchy and conflict and can also have coalitions and cooperation". According to the same author, an essential aspect of a field is its fluidity. The "degree of consensus and contention internal to a field is constantly changing", and "the actors constantly jockey for positions even in settled fields". Therefore, SAF boundaries are emergent, developed by participants as they share work, determine their roles and relationships and create an understanding of their goals and rules of acceptability (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). SAFs are intertwined and interdependent, which implies that the transformation of a stable field may be triggered by episodes of contention (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

According to Moulton and Sandfort (2017), a SAF is a meso-level social order where collective action occurs. It raises the foundational problem of collective strategic action. The theory adds strategic action to the concept of fields. Kluttz and Fligstein (2016) argue that this incorporates the concept of a social skill into the theory of action and consequently allows considerations of agency, the actors, and field relations in a more systematic manner. Strategic action is "the attempt by social actors to create and maintain stable social worlds by securing the cooperation of others" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, p. 17). Kluttz and Fligstein (2016) point out that social skill is considered particularly important as a driver of field relations and "is the mechanisms for stepping in the shoes of others and mobilising collective action". It is a "micro-level mechanism" that shapes the construction and transformation of the field. Social skill is "the cognitive capacity for reading people and environments, framing lines of action, and mobilising people in the service of these activities frames, and (...) is the idea that people want to produce collective action by engaging others" (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, p. 7).

Pettinicchio (2013, p. 83) highlights that "an important goal of strategic action is the creation of a shared capacity for viewing a problem; as strategic action, entrepreneurship involves the ability of actors to create consensus around an issue through frame alignment as well as the mobilisation of inside and outside actors into a coalition that assists in that effort".

Kluttz and Fligstein (2016) note that the actors pursue their interest in the name of power, yet within the field, they do not enhance their social skills solely to achieve material self-interest. Another motivational factor is the basic human need to fashion a meaningful world for oneself and engage in collective action, named in theory the "existential function of the social". Accordingly, a SAF offers a novel micro-foundation of action based on collective meaning-making, identity and belongingness. As such, even the exercise of power and

conflict with others is often a manifestation of the pursuit to reach collective meaning-making, identity, and belonging.

Exogenous factors also have a crucial impact on SAFs. Field dynamics can vary according to historical conditions, such as periods of field formation, periods of institutionalised stability, and periods of rupture, crisis and change (Flingstein and McAdam, 2011). The theory highlights how exogenous factors can lead to the failure of the actors involved in the field.

This study has been mainly informed by a 2015 paper by Sandfort and Moulton, exploring the effective implementation of practice through a SAF perspective. The authors argue that SAF is useful because it allows consideration of how the social structures shape policy outcomes in implementing systems. Framing implementation within a SAF allows one to combine attention to the core policy programme with an understanding of social structures and dynamics. Through the lens of this approach, the commissioning policy field can be thought of as a unique institutional setting or SAF. For instance, in the commissioning market, the actors compete against each other to dominate the field.

According to Sandfort and Moulton (2015, pp. 69-70), as a strategic action field, it “has a unique social structure that enables participants to work together towards a common purpose”. In their view, at each level of the implementation process, there are distinct social structures with formal or informal regulations and funder expectations that act as permeable boundaries, limiting the activities of the actors. These social structures shape the minds and actions of the actors who work within the field. There are “formal coordinating mechanisms such as hierarchical chains of command, contracts and rules (...) but also informal cultural beliefs and norms that shape the way a specific program is interpreted and carried out” (Sandfort and Moulton, 2015, p. 72). Furthermore, because the core programme is embedded across multiple levels, what happens in practice is the “result of dynamics within and between the policy field, organisations, and front lines of the implementation system”. Consequently, those structures can be meant to enable positive changes or negative ones (e.g., to constrain the ability of some actors to develop the most creative and innovative solution to tackle a specific problem).

According to the authors (pp. 70-71), it “requires unpacking social dynamics and constraints operating at each level of the system”. For them, to improve the implementation outcomes, what is needed is knowledge of the policy content (e.g., the policy system with social value), skilful management of programmes (e.g., social skills for embedding good commissioning practices) and knowledge of the social system (e.g., people affected by the policy, what are their needs).

3 Research methodology and methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the design and overall approach of the current study, including the methods used to conduct the data collection, the data analysis method, and the motivations behind the choices made in the research process. The rationale for the philosophical considerations is outlined in Section 3.1. Furthermore, Section 3.2 describes the methodological strategy, and Sections 3.3 and 3.4 explain the rationale for using a qualitative case study and the technique adopted, respectively. The chapter also presents the fieldwork data analysis, types of data collected and the analytical methods used (Section 3.5). It concludes with the ethical concerns of the study (Section 3.6) and the researcher's reflexivity concerning the fieldwork (Section 3.7). The final section (3.8) presents the reliability and validity of the research.

3.2 Research paradigm and epistemological and ontological position

3.2.1 Ontological and epistemological considerations

Ontological research assumptions generally concern the nature of reality and existence, and they “shape the way in which you see and study the research objects” (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 127). Saunders et al. (2016) define two perspectives for formulating philosophical research assumptions: (1) subjectivism, “that social reality is made from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors” (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 130), and (2) objectivism, which is associated with realism. The latter perspective regards social entities as independent of how a researcher view or labels them (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 128) and demonstrate that “the interpretations and experiences of the actors do not influence the social world”. In Braun and Clarke's (2013) view, ontology is a continuum ranging from realism to critical realism, further extending into relativism. Easterby-Smith et al. (2018, p. 64) underscore a continuum of four leading ontological positions: realism (1), internal realism (2), relativism (3) and nominalism (4). Each of these dimensions holds a different view regarding the reality of truth and facts (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018, p. 67). The respective positions range from the idea that (1) truth is singular and facts can be discovered to the notion that (4) there is no truth and facts

are created by the actors; alternatively, there may be multiple truths and facts depending on the observer's perspective (3).

Epistemological issues relate to the methods of accessing knowledge about the social phenomena of concern. They attempt to identify “the most appropriate ways of enquiring into the nature of the world” (Easterby-Smith, 2018, p. 61). We can distinguish between two main epistemological positions: positivism and social constructivism. While the former postulates that explanations must demonstrate causality and that concepts need to be defined and measured, the latter places research as one of the objects of observation. On the latter view, concepts should incorporate stakeholders' perspectives, among others.

3.2.2 Research paradigms

The study framework extracts philosophical insights from an interpretivism paradigm. It focuses on an explorative understanding of the phenomenon under analysis.

In particular, it recognises the fundamental need to incorporate paradigms and to locate the study within the discourses of the significant changes in thought and practice, also known as paradigm shifts (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 333).

The research paradigm encompasses both ontological (i.e. about the nature of reality) and epistemological dimensions. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018, p. 81), ontology recognises that social conditions can exert impact and produce real consequences, although these may not always be observed.

This study takes a qualitative methodological stance that broadly comprises Lincoln and Guba's (1985) and Burrell and Morgan's (1979) interpretive paradigms. It focuses on interpreting society from the viewpoint of social actors in real settings (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

Lincoln and Guba (1985, Chapter 1) discuss and contrast the positivist and naturalist (or post-positivist) research paradigms. They base their discussion on five axioms associated with the nature of reality, the relationship of the knower to the known, the possibilities of generalisation and causal linkages, and the role of values. The naturalistic paradigm (or post-positivism) views reality as “multiple, constructed and holistic”. Although the inquiry is inevitably “value-bound”, the “knower and the known” are understood to be interactive and inseparable, and “all entities are in a state of (...) mutual shaping so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects”. Conversely, the positivist position maintains that reality is “single, tangible

and fragmentable”. This kind of inquiry is value-independent and relies on attributing effects to causes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The “context in which a process occurs” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 334) and the subsequent context-dependency of the process in question is of critical concern. Easterby-Smith et al. (2018, p. 81) cite the work of Bhaskar (1978), who differentiates between three levels within the ontological position of critical realism: (i) the empirical domain, which comprises the human experiences and perceptions of the existing domain, including (ii) the events and actions that occur, whether or not they are observed or detected in the real domain and (iii) any causal powers and mechanisms that cannot be detected directly, but that nonetheless have real consequences on both individual and societal levels. With regards to the features of critical realism, Easterby-Smith et al. (2018, p. 81) support the argument put forth in this study, which recognises that reality is generally multiplied and differently constructed by those involved in the empirical domain and that this notion forms the basis of the human experiences and perceptions of a particular phenomenon. Furthermore, the context itself, which includes any events and actions that occur and whether they are observed, also plays a fundamental role.

To this end, the present study focuses on the interpretative philosophical nature of the phenomenon explored, further informed by a critical realist position.

In the spirit of constructing an interpretive paradigm, this study takes a qualitative methodological stance by exploring how individuals create meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Sarantakos (1998, pp. 38-41) states that interpretivism “interprets and understands the actors’ reasons for social action, the way they construct their lives and the meanings they attach to them as well as to comprehend the social context”. The critical perspective removes “false beliefs and ideas about society and social reality” in the same vein. Easterby-Smith (2018, p. 80) notes that critical realism constitutes an approach to social research “with an explicit ontological position”, combining features of both positivism and constructionism. In other words, it fuses a realist ontology with an interpretative epistemology. The choices made in this study were influenced by the phenomenon analysed, i.e. policy implementation in the commissioning process, which is anchored in the reality of an institutional context. Therefore, this research explores the commissioning process of service provision and the working relationships of commissioners and VSOs. It explores how they engage in the meaning creation of social value in the commissioning process through the lenses of the policy implementation (SVA).

The study adopts a critical perspective approach in analysing a real contemporary phenomenon. In the spirit of perfecting a more critical realist position, the interpretation of the phenomenon by the actors within the field has been considered for analysis. However, it is influenced by the institutional context within which the phenomenon occurs.

The reality of the commissioning process by social value is a field shaped by causal drivers and changes that introduce instability. The context analysed raises several dimensions of discussion regarding social and organisational problems during the commissioning process.

Many different beliefs exist within the truth concerning the embedding of social value in the commissioning process. For example, at an organisational level, the local contracting authority may have a formal or official stance on the interpretation of social value and the implementation thereof in commissioning contracts within its role as an institution. On the other hand, other actors in various positions within the governance system (such as VSOs) may possess divergent perspectives on the phenomena observed and the underlying motivations. Therefore, apart from an examination of reality-based formal local-contracting authorities and interpretations by other actors, another picture of reality emerges—that of the researcher’s view underpinning this study.

3.3 Research purpose and type

3.3.1 Research purpose

This study involves an explorative purpose and design, motivated mainly by the desire to understand the phenomenon and the current extent of the relevant research at the initial stage. The topic is new and complex, and the diverse perspectives on the issues under discussion need to be unified into a more cohesive analysis framework. Fundamentally, the research purpose may take various forms, including “exploratory, descriptive, explanatory or evaluative or some combination of those” (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 174), depending on the aim of the research.

This study takes a more holistic explorative approach, incorporating a descriptive touch to understand the commissioning process and obtain insights from various significant sources linked to the phenomenon under analysis. In this case, an explorative research design was selected as it enables researchers to understand an issue or phenomenon and clarify their interpretation. In other words, it is a “means to ask open questions to

discover what is happening and gain insights about a topic of interest” (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 174) and to “develop an initial description or, possibly, an understanding of some social phenomenon” (Blaikie and Priest 2019, p. 80). The descriptive purpose allows us “to gain an accurate profile of events, persons or situations” (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 175); it is a means to “[give] voice’ to a topic or a group of people, particularly those we know little about” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 173) and “to provide a detailed account, or the precise measurement and reporting, of the characteristics of some population, group or phenomenon, (...)” (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p. 80).

Reality is broadly subjective and interpreted differently depending on the individual, who makes sense of their world by creating their own “systems of meanings” (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 40). The present study is grounded in a subjectivist approach which argues that “both researcher and participants’ knowledge are contextual, situated in practice and based on perceptions and interpretations (...) of what is going on around us” (Cunliffe 2011, p. 658). In this regard, the study aims to “understand and discover people’s meanings” when encountering a particular phenomenon. It also examines how meanings become shared, dominant and contested in situations in which alternative interpretations are present and possible (Gephart, 2004, p. 457).

Other forms of research are not considered in this study. The study adopts a qualitative methodological stance rooted in exploration rather than the aim to “establish causal relationships between variables” (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 176), as explanatory research is designed to accomplish. The purpose of the latter type of research is “to establish the elements, factors or mechanisms that are responsible for producing the state of or regularities in a social phenomenon” (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p. 80).

Although this study examines the implementation of a policy in a field, it does not seek to evaluate its effectiveness directly. The purpose of evaluative research is “to find out how well something works” (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 176). It is concerned with assessing the effectiveness of an organisational or business strategy, policy, programme, initiative or process, and it “sets out to determine whether a policy or programme has been effective in achieving certain policy or programme goals” (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p. 83). The author, citing the work of Weiss (1972, p. 6), notes that this purpose “measures the effects of a program against the goals it set out to accomplish as a means of contributing to subsequent decision-making about the program and improving future programming”. According to Blaikie and Priest (2019, p. 83), this involves both formative (i.e. monitored or continuous feedback during the implementation of a policy to improve it) and summative (i.e. applied after a policy has been implemented to establish its overall effectiveness in achieving the original goals) evaluations.

This study aims to clarify the formal view of the front line workers with the commissioning process embedding social value and to discover and interpret their meanings when framing social value in action. It concerns how individuals, namely English front-line workers in both local contracting authorities and VSOs, work with the concept of commissioning for social value and the procurement practices for service delivery.

In broad terms, the concept of social value exists in a generalised, ideal sense. The concept of understanding is a subjective creation of the human mind. The essential point is that its interpretation varies as individuals, in trying to “make sense of their world”, create their own “system of meanings” (Sarantakos 1998, p. 40), translating such systems into action depending on the institutional commissioning context and the external drivers of the agenda. The outcomes of this study are context-bound and offer insight into the implementation of the commissioning process for social value within specific contexts. It identifies relevant tensions in the process concerning implementing the social value policy. Furthermore, it facilitates an understanding of how one may work with social value in commissioning.

3.4 Research design

3.4.1 Summary of the research design

This study design is modelled on a case-study approach, following Yin (2009) and Thomas’ (2016) work. Yin (2009, p. 18) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident”. It is deemed appropriate when the contextual conditions are highly relevant to the phenomenon under study and in scenarios where such events and contexts cannot always be distinguished. In such situations, he suggests that case study research can benefit from “prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (Yin, 1994, p. 13). He considers a case study approach most appropriate when it poses questions concerning the how and why of a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little to no control (Yin 1994, p. 9). Case studies can involve singular or multiple cases as well as variable levels of analysis (i.e. they may employ an embedded design).

The present research, in particular, considers the commissioning cycle under analysis as a single embedded case study. Given the focus on the experience of the commissioning process and practices, a qualitative case study design was chosen as the optimal strategy for this purpose. The evidence obtained is explorative and interpretative. However, case studies involve various data collection techniques, such as interviews,

documentary analysis and observations. As a form of qualitative research, a case study does not require a particular method of data analysis. As a research process, the case study develops through a design and a fieldwork phase, corresponding to data collection and analysis, respectively (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Several mandatory decisions determine the investigative path regarding purpose, approach and process, and they shape the type of case study that is undertaken (Thomas, 2016, p. 112).

The present study focuses on a current event, and its research questions fall within Yin's qualitative *how* and *why* categories. The approach adopted focuses on exploring, describing, and evaluating the phenomenon under investigation. It regards the commissioning process as an event or problem to be explored and evaluated. The study allows us to gain in-depth contextual knowledge of the research problems through the use of multi-qualitative methods. To this end, a sole case study embedded with analytic sub-units was employed to investigate the phenomenon.

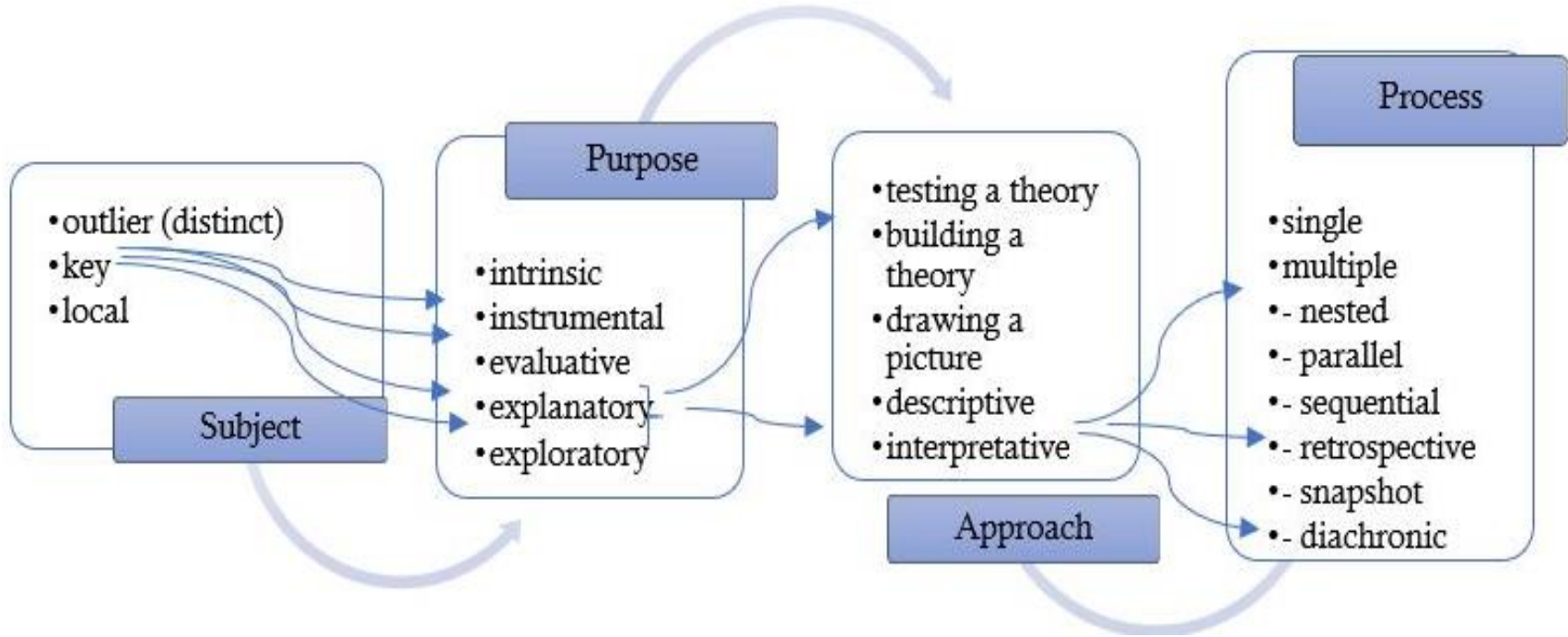
With regards to data presentation, the various methodological approaches to a case study are informed by different philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches. This study considers, to a certain extent, Yin's (realist and post-positivist) perspective of the case study as a "more structured approach" (Boblin et al., 2013, p. 1268). According to Boblin et al.'s (2013, pp. 1268-1269) discussion on Yin's (2009) work and philosophical assumptions on the case study, on this view, "reality (ultimate truth) is objective and predictable and based on causal explanations that direct both the research and result of the findings". Epistemologically, "the researcher has a detached, neutral and independent view of what studies are".

The present study further considers Thomas' (2016, p. 23) research on the case study methodology. In his view, the case study enables us to form a rich picture and "gain analytical insights from it". When conducting this kind of research, "the emphasis is on the singleness (Thomas, 2016, p. 37), and it is the "focus that is special to the case study" (Thomas, 2016, p. 44). Furthermore, this research is "a means to an end (that is, answering a question), not an end in itself"; it is a design frame rather than a method, and it "can be used with a wide range of research methods" (Thomas, 2016, p. 44). The rationale behind the case study is the "assumption that holism provides an effective and fruitful way of addressing many of the questions that are posed in the social inquiry" (Thomas, 2016, p. 60). However, the inquiry process of such a research design does not always aim to produce a generalisation.

As illustrated in Figure 3.1, this study is a key case: it is a good example, and it is not one within the researcher's local knowledge. Such studies' purposes are intrinsic (i.e. interest in the topic itself) and instrumental (i.e. a purposeful means to understand a given process better). It is exploratory, on account of

the researcher’s aim to explore a topic on which they do not know very much, and “where little is known, and the principal purpose is to establish the ‘shape’ of the problem or issue” (Thomas, 2016, p. 132). Furthermore, it is explanatory, in light of the researcher’s desire to explain the topic to themselves and others (Thomas, 2016, p. 115) and “where the phenomenon in which you are interested needs ‘unpacking’”. The case study offers a route to explanation (Thomas, 2016, p. 132) through theory building and interpretative approaches, i.e. “seeking to understand the perspectives and positions of those who lived through the period” (Thomas, 2016, p. 115). These processes may involve multiple studies, including those nested, retrospectives and diachronic (i.e. changing over time, such as in longitudinal studies).

Figure 3.1 Mapping out the case study design for this study



Source: Elaborated upon from Thomas (2016)

Other types of research design are also available, depending on the process and the “technical decisions involved in the research project planning” (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p. 18). Furthermore, the choice of research design is impingent upon the researcher’s philosophical stance and two types of methodologies: positivist and constructivist.

As mentioned earlier, a qualitative approach was selected for this study rather than, for instance, a quantitative positivist research design such as an experimental design (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 94),

which “involves the random assignment of study participants to either an experimental or a control group”, or a survey, which constitutes part of an explanatory research project (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 101) and often takes the form of a questionnaire, associated with a deductive approach (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 144). Other methodologies are based on a constructionist design; these include action research, cooperative inquiry, archival research, ethnography and narrative methods. An action research design and an ethnographic approach to the study were both considered in the initial stages of the study. However, they were eventually repealed due to limited access and the difficulty of obtaining an insider role in the institutional contexts concerning the phenomenon under analysis.

An ethnographic role on the part of the researcher would have required “a systematic and sustained engagement with a field, where the researcher becomes immersed in a new context that poses unexpected challenges and puzzles to solve” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 213). According to the same authors, this refers to the “long-term and in-depth use” of participant observation, alongside “other methods (such as interviews), to understand an entire social system”. Also, participant observation as a method and ethnography as a research strategy are separate concepts. The former, a form of ethnography in itself, requires “close involvement in the organisation in order to gain a detailed understanding of other people’s realities” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 15). Meanwhile, an action research design would have enabled the researcher “to seek understanding through attempting to change the situation under investigation” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 111).

The process of researching a single case study involves multiple approaches, and the focus on the commissioning process allows us to explore the various stages of this process.

While the focal point is the commissioning process and the implementation of the SVA, there are other nested elements involved. This study considers the commissioning process and its consideration of social value at various stages regarding the VSOs and local authorities as nested elements. The subject of the study is the exploration of the SVA in the commissioning process for public service delivery in England. It is based on the analytical frame representing the relationships between the local contracting authorities and voluntary sector service providers in the commissioning process. As such, it concerns the influence of the SVA on the relationships between the VSOs and local contracting authorities in the commissioning process at various levels.

3.4.2 Sampling and units of analysis

The research setting was formulated with reference to the local contracting authorities in England and the VSOs. Within this population, participants who can make meaningful contributions to the aim of the study were selected.

A non-probabilistic method in a natural setting (i.e. a non-generalisable sample) was selected rather than a probabilistic sample, which aims to represent the population as accurately as possible. According to Blaikie and Priest (2019, p. 155), a sample “is a selection of elements (members or units) from a defined population and may be used to make statements about that population”. The inclusion and exclusion of sampling strategies involve identifying “who or what do we want to hear from” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 56).

The qualitative researcher selects the cases with a purpose in mind or non-probabilistic methods such as accidental (convenience), judgemental or snowball sampling.

Within the constraints of the study, in light of the appropriateness and accessibility of the cases, it was vital to ensure a basic level of diversity in the sample. The size and form of the organisations and types of services under investigation vary widely. A purposive and snowball approach was adopted to achieve in-depth “insights and in-depth understanding of the topic of interest” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 56) while selecting the most representative. Participants can generate meaningful information for the analysis. This choice of sampling method means that the researcher has a clear idea of what sample units are needed, and the participants are the most relevant individuals who can answer the research question. The overall purpose of this selection was to obtain a sample that could offer a complete understanding of the phenomenon in question from different perspectives.

One reason for snowball sampling was to gain access to participants from both the public and the voluntary sectors. The snowball sampling strategy is a type of convenience sampling (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 57) which “starts with someone that meets the criteria of inclusion and then [asks] the name of other participants who will also be eligible” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 82). It involves a process of recommendations and references in which the existing participants suggest other candidates from among their acquaintances (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 138). Therefore, once the researcher has set up contact with a participant, that individual refers another person with knowledge on the subject to be analysed. This approach influenced and supported the decisions of the case practices in this study, mainly in Phase II of the data collection process.

This phase focused mainly on front-line workers who possess knowledge of the commissioning practices in VSOs.

Decisions concerning the units of study may affect the choice of sampling strategy and the data collection procedures. Such units can vary from individuals, groups or organisations to roles, policies, programmes, or other social artefacts. Data can be collected from individuals, groups or social artefacts. Yin (1994) uses analytic units to distinguish between four types of case study designs based on either single or multiple cases. According to him, the former is “holistic, while the multiple case study has embedded units of analysis” (Yin 1994, p. 39). For this study, the sample shares the characteristic of being mainly front-line workers who have worked in commissioning and procurement and possess knowledge of the SVA and the monitoring and evaluation of social value.

3.4.3 The choice of participants (diversity within samples)

The research methodology aimed to achieve diversity across the samples. During Phase I of data collection, the study design was refined to enable a more in-depth investigation in Phase II.

The rationales for sampling were as follows:

1. English local contracting authorities: This was the sample included in the research at the local level (i.e. local authorities); it was selected since the national policy of the SVA was applied at the local level. At this level, the concerns of the grassroots organisations intersect directly with those of the state and the government (Gaventa and Valderrama, 1999). Additionally, the process for strengthening participatory democracy is more evident at this level (Licha, 2002), in which the local authorities “concentrate time and resources on the direct delivery of services when compared to central governments” (Kettl and Fesler, 2008).
2. Commissioners and VSOs professionals (local front-line workers): The commissioners are the front-line workers that apply the (SVA) policy during the commissioning process. The policy prompts them to consider social value in public service contracts. These actors were chosen on account of their ties to the VSOs in public service delivery. They decide on the inclusion of the given social value within the contract and the provider who can deliver the appropriate social value for a particular contracted service. In this role, they act as the bridge (i.e. a facilitator or broker) that links the will of the local authority with that of the voluntary sector providers.

3. VSOs (as front-line workers in organisations of varied sizes): These actors play a significant role in service delivery, contributing to social value work. Furthermore, the initial premises of the SVA are to support VSOs in delivering contracts with embedded social value.

The following segment introduces the participant sample. Overall, the sample contains many professional participants with experience in social value policy, programmes and service provision. It includes (i) a number of participants from local contracting authorities and VSOs who have experienced the issue studied; (ii) individuals with knowledge of the SVA and commissioning, enabling the researcher to explore as many diverse perspectives as possible and (iii) those acting as consultants in specific networks that deal with the issue of interest.

In order to define the boundaries of the study, the following caveats should be noted. The demographics of the organisational typologies involved in this study are dissimilar. The participants were not sampled based on criteria such as their respective organisation's size, sector, or location. In this regard, the research does not follow a comparative design or aim for comparability between the cases analysed. The range of organisations interviewed differs between the two phases of data collection: Phase I involved different policy organisations based in various locations across England. In contrast, Phase II involved local contracting authorities and VSO in the southeast region of the country.

Therefore, for Phase I of data collection, various samples of policy organisations were selected on a broad level. The inclusion criteria included work experience in commissioning for social value (e.g. commissioners), experience in writing commissioning proposals or delivering contracts commissioning social value (e.g. project managers in VSOs), experience advising on social value measurement (e.g. SROI consultants) and other relevant experience (e.g. think tank members and infrastructure organisations).

Phase II adopted a more focused approach, and the corresponding sample was mainly drawn from local contracting authorities to explore the perspectives of front-line workers in both local authorities and the voluntary sector. The primary participants were the commissioners themselves, i.e. those who decide whether to embed or discharge social value in a contract and set the service design specifications. The VSOs play the role of service providers. The participants comprised executive directors, project managers and staff who have worked on contracts, and volunteers. For example, in one of the cases analysed, the project manager reported to the commissioner on the progress achieved. The local contracting authority includes various positions in the commissioning or procurement project teams, such as commissioning managers, contract and procurement officers, solicitors and the policy team.

3.4.4 Sample participant profiles

The data collection process was divided into phases to ensure diversity in the sample, as mentioned in the previous section. The following table (Table 3.1) outlines a broad overview of the profiles of the participants in each phase. The first phase (research fieldwork), which involved organisations at various policy levels, was conducted from January to July 2018. The second phase (data collection), comprising three cases, occurred between May 2018 and March 2019.

Table 3.1 Phases of data collection at various levels

Phases	Participant organisations	Profile participants	Data collection methods
First phase of fieldwork <i>(Jan - Jul '18)</i>	Organisations at various policy levels	Public commissioners; charity managers, charity chairs, consultants (mainly SROI experts), researchers, CEOs, local contracting authorities' strategy officers, etc.	Semi-structured interviews
Second phase of fieldwork <i>(May '18 - Mar '19)</i>	Three case practice organisations	Sample of VSO participants: -CEOs, chief executives, finance managers, social value project managers, procurement managers. Sample of local contracting authority participants: - Public commissioners. - Policy on social value team members. - Contract officers.	Semi-structured interviews, participant observations during meetings, workshops, events.

Source: Developed by researcher

The following paragraphs provide a more detailed explication of the profiles of the participants in each phase.

Phase I – Participant sample

As Table 3.2 below indicates, the sample of the experts interviewed comprised specialists from diverse backgrounds. There are varied experts representing policy organizations. The prominent professional figures interviewed were SROI consultants. Some experts had multi-dimensional knowledge from varied sectors due to their professional experiences working with local authorities and the voluntary sector.

Table 3.2 Profile participants (Phase I)

No	Specialisation
IP1	Director of Social Enterprise
IP2	Consultant
IP3	Consultant
IP4	Chair Infrastructure Organisation for Charities (ex-commissioner)
IP5	Executive Director of Social Enterprise (ex-chief procurement)
IP6	Executive Director of Social Enterprise (ex-chief executive/senior officer)
IP7	Social Enterprise Consultant
IP8 (CC1)	Local Authority Commissioner
IP9(CC)	Charity Project Manager
IP10	Infrastructure Organisation Manager
IP11 (CC)	Charity Manager
IP12	Senior Public Services Researcher
IP13 (CB1)	Senior Strategy Officer (Charities)
IP14	Director (Charity)
IP15	Procurement Manager
IP16 (CB)	Senior Officer Local Authority (SVA policy)
IP17	Local Authority Policy Implementation Manager/Procurement Services
IP18 (CB)	VSO Local Authority Programme Officer
IP19	Local authority Strategy Officer for VSO supply chain

Source: Developed by the researcher

Phase II – Participant sample

This phase focused on the local contracting authorities and VSOs involved in the commissioning process. Therefore, the departments of procurement and commissioning in the local contracting authorities (Cases A, B and C) were the primary targets. It mainly includes individuals working on SVA policy and commissioning as well as VSO strategy within the council to enhance the voluntary sector access to the commissioning process. The number of participants varied in each case, as there was no intention of drawing any comparisons between the cases. Moreover, each case had its own experiences in considering and implementing the SVA. The front-line workers in both local authorities and VSOs were interviewed for each case.

The following segment presents a short description of each case.

In case A, representing a local contracting authority, the primary participants were the policy team members working on the social value policy and various VSOs in the local authority. The following table (Table 3.3) presents detailed profiles of these participants. Among them, some participants were commissioners and procurement managers working with the commissioning of services. The procurement team intended to enact a social value policy to regulate how the commissioning/ procurement is delivered. In this case, a couple of charity organizations were interviewed.

Table 3.3 Case A – Participant Profiles (Phase II)

No	Type organisations	Specialisation
CA1 (LA)	Local Authority	Policy Officer
CA2 (LA)	Local Authority	Manager Community Enterprise
CA3 (LA)	Local Authority	Manager Commercial Support
CA4 (LA)	Local Authority	Policy Community Support
CA5 (LA)	Local Authority	Data Scientist
CA6 (LA)	Local Authority	Manager
CA7 (LA)	Local Authority	Commercial Lead
CA8 (LA)	Local Authority	Manager
CA9 (LA)	Local Authority	Director
CA10 (VSO)	VSO	Project Manager
CA11 (VSO)	VSO	Manager
CA12 (VSO)	VSO (Infrastructure Org)	Director
CA13 (LA)	Local Authority	Manager Service Development
CA14 (LA)	Local Authority	Commissioner
CA15 (VSO)	VSO	Charity

Source: Developed by the researcher

Case B included interviews with the policy research teams, CVS and VSOs. The following table (Table 3.4) presents the detailed profiles of this group of participants. Most of the profiles of the participants are representative of the commissioning team in the local authority. They are the experts carrying out the VSO strategy and the new strategy for improving the commissioning process through innovative engagement mechanisms like co-design of services and co-production. They are the leading experts from the local authority commissioning, procurement teams and voluntary sector. In this case, just a charity organization has been interviewed.

Table 3.4 Case B – Participant Profiles (Phase II)

No	Type organisations	Specialisation
CB1 (LA) (IP13)	Local Authority	Senior Officer Charities
CB2 (LA) (IP16)	Local Authority	Senior Officer (SVA Policy)
CB3 (LA) (IP18)	Local Authority	VSO Programme Officer
CB4 (VSO)	VSO	Executive Director CVS
CB5 (LA)	Local Authority	Project Manager
CB6 (LA)	Local Authority	Procurement Manager
CB7 (LA)	Local Authority	Manager
CB8 (LA)	Local Authority	VSO Strategy Manager
CB9 (LA)	Local Authority	Commissioner
CB10 (LA)	Local Authority	Senior Officer
CB11 (VSO)	VSO	Charity Director

Source: Developed by the researcher

Meanwhile, Case C focused on a charity that had been awarded a contract with embedded social value. This case included interviews with the VSO project team and the public commissioner who awarded the project in question. In addition, some VSOs in the local authority were also interviewed. Table 3.5 presents a detailed overview of the corresponding participant profiles.

Table 3.5 Case C – Participant Profiles (Phase II)

No	Type organisations	Specialisation
CC1 (LA)(IP8)	Local Authority	Commissioner
CC2 (VSO)(IP9)	VSO	Project Manager
CC3 (VSO)	VSO	Volunteer Recruitment Coordinator
CC4 (VSO)	VSO	Volunteer Service Coordinator
CC5 (VSO)	VSO	Regional Manager / Assistant Director
CC6 (VSO)	VSO	Business Development Manager
CC7 (LA)	Local Authority	Commissioner
CC8 (VSO)	VSO	Project Manager

Source: Developed by the researcher

3.4.5 Rationale for the case choices

As outlined in the above sections, three types of local contracting authority cases were selected for this study. These cases involved the commissioning procurement practices of English local authorities and VSOs. Owing to the heterogeneous nature of the cases, they do not allow for a comparative approach or any generalisations. Each case involved varying stages of embedding social value criteria into the commissioning and procurement processes and enabled the researcher to explore the phenomenon in more depth for some policy stages than others. The access to fieldwork also varied depending on the case, the levels of access available and any confidentiality concerns.

The justifications for the methodological approach adopted in each case are briefly presented below.

- The SVA is concerned with local contractual commissioning service provision in England and Wales. Additionally, its intention is to support VSOs and their activities as service providers in the local market.
- Second, the inclusion criteria targeted the local contracting authorities in England. Although the SVA applies to England and Wales, a single region was selected as the study location. According to Dobson (2012, p. 3), the SVA “applies in England and, to a very limited circumstance, in Wales”. The location

was also determined by the ease of gaining access to organisations and logistics within the time frame of the study.

- Third, the selection of the cases was flexible, and some changes occurred during the first data collection phase. As Yin (1994) notes, the “flexibility of the research design is in selecting cases different from those initially identified” (p. 53). These choices depended extensively on the negotiated access and the opportunities offered by the participants. The researcher carefully considered whether the cases were appropriate for the study.
- Fourth, from the first sampling stage, the fieldwork inclusion criteria were not based on location, size, population and/or sector of the organisations. Instead, they were based on fulfilling best practices, although the final cases selected were not fully represented in this sense.
- Fifth, for each case, various data were collected using different methods, depending on availability and context.

The following paragraphs highlight some general observations on the status quo.

- i) The cases are located in the southeast of England. These locations are deprived areas that face complex social issues such as social transformations due to migration, a large number of disadvantaged groups and people at risk of poverty and unemployment. The needs of such individuals are prioritised on the political agenda of the local contracting authority. Social value is present in social care and inclusion projects, such as those related to youth unemployment, at-risk groups for poverty and exclusion, and economic development.
- ii) Due to variations in political agenda, interest and awareness, each local contracting authority considered the SVA at a different pace.
- iii) All the cases recognised the significant role of the VSOs as suppliers. However, each case responded to this role differently by offering grants or commissioning contracts (predominantly) to service providers. The 2015 Review Regulation 40 explicitly includes the potential suppliers in pre-procurement market consultations, provided that the pro-competitive principles of non-discrimination and transparency are upheld (Social Value Portal, 2018). In practice, the degree of VSO engagement in designing services and in-service delivery varies.
- iv) All the cases recognised a decline in the contractual funding relationship with the VSOs due to budget cuts and austerity. The process of accessing public funding has posed a challenge to the VSOs, especially the contracts with social value, which are usually significant commitments and therefore often awarded to larger organisations (i.e., large charities, corporates).

- v) One commonality is that public commissioners often regard the application of the SVA as an opportunity to cut costs while addressing the growing social challenges.

3.4.6 Reflections on the choice of cases

The sampling of the cases was influenced by the opportunities that emerged during the ongoing fieldwork, including networking events and informal conversations, which played a significant role in the participant selection process.

Expressly, the cases represent three VSOs within local authorities of varying sizes (small, medium and large) and income generation activities. Multiple small-to-medium-sized charities offering a variety of services were included, and they cover sectors such as local employment, health and social care.

Case A came to light during the Social Value Summit in London (2018). At the time, the methodological aim was to enlist a recognised best practice for the analysis; however, the choice changed due to fieldwork difficulties in establishing access. In this case, the researcher was aware that the organisation was in the early stages of considering social value in its procurement procedures. The importance of such a context was one of the rationales for choosing this organisation. Moreover, the drive and enthusiasm of the organisation towards its strategic goals to develop a social value policy framework from the outset made it a valuable context for this study.

With Case B, the agreement to access the participant data was obtained at a later stage. The first interview with a public officer in the local contracting authority paved the way for gaining access to other kinds of information. This meeting introduced an opportunity for the researcher to attend a VSO-orientated training workshop on co-production, which provided further opportunities to establish interview contacts. The participants, in this case, were selected on account of their express openness towards their engagement with the VSO. They placed value on VSOs role in service provision and were interested in supporting the sector capacity building. The council embraced an innovative approach of co-designing outcomes and service specifications for the commissioning process. In addition, they adopted a social value policy framework (in early 2018) to guide their procurement process. All these elements formed an exciting and revelatory path for exploring social value.

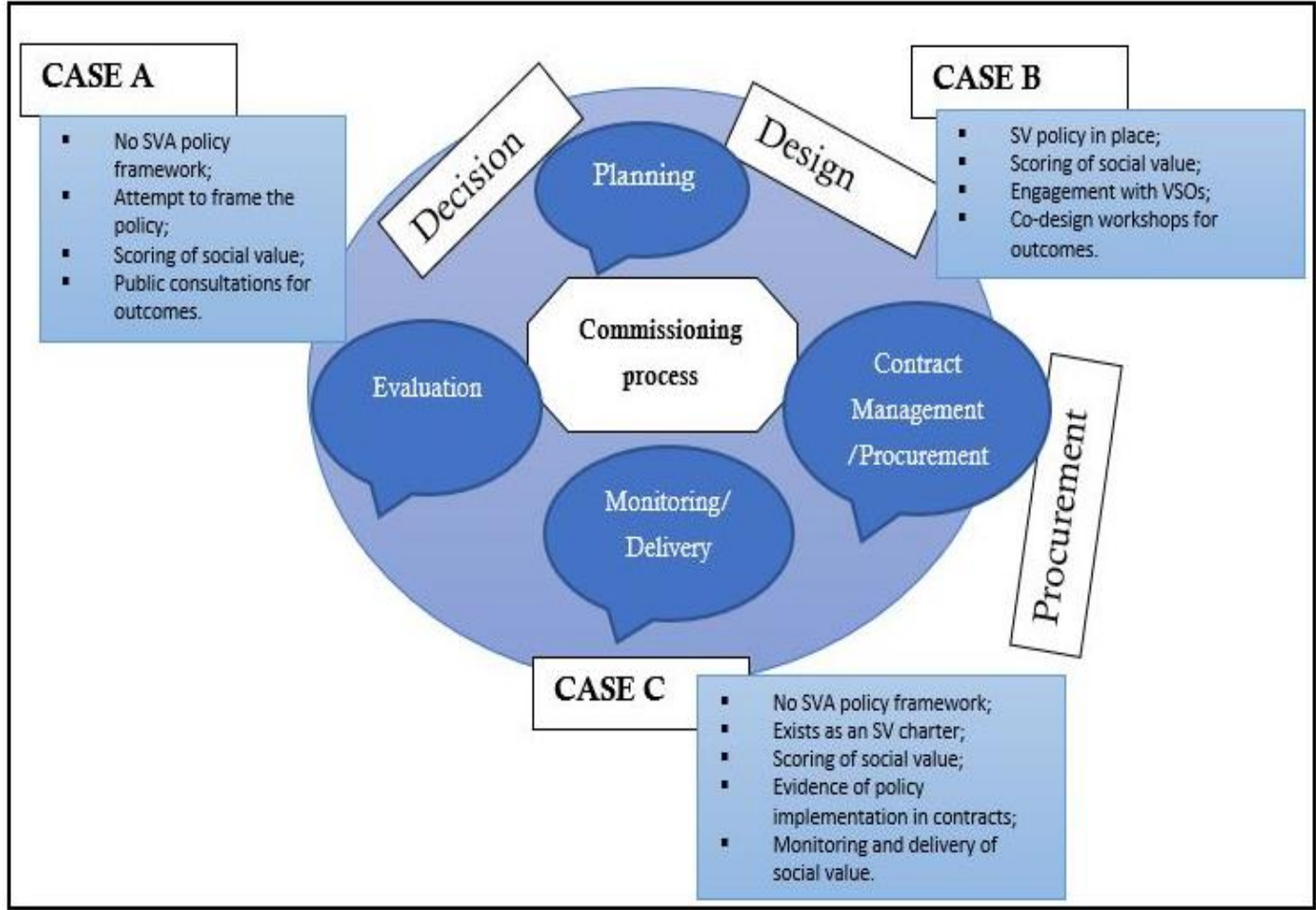
Case C involved several interviews with various charity organisations. The process placed the researcher in contact with a commissioner who had awarded a contract for social value to a large charity that works with vulnerable young people. Despite the lack of social value policies, the commissioner was committed to including the social value in his contracts based on government directives. This contact offered an opportunity to approach the large charity and examine their work in delivering social value. In summary, each case revealed diverse insights into varying levels of the commissioning process cycle.

The following figure (Figure 3.2) outlines an overview of the status of the cases selected, allowing for an in-depth analysis. It underlined schematically the position of each of the cases undertaken and the SVA. Case A highlights a study of an early-stage experience of considering social value policy implementation in their commissioning process. The approach towards the policy complies with the government policy. In some contracts of service and works, the social value criteria are applied. During the fieldwork, the policy and procurement teams were trying to develop a social value policy specific to the local authority. The relationship between the local authority and the voluntary sector is overall limited. There is an encouragement for the VSOs towards the contracting culture. There is not much support for this sector to access the market of commissioning for social value.

The second case (Case B) has a Social Value policy in place. The local authority also has a robust political agenda to transform the commissioning for service provision. They recently shifted towards commissioning for outcomes and with a strong focus on co-design and co-production approaches. There is a strong focus on creating a strategy of engagement with the VSOs in the local community. The aim is also in supporting the sector towards the transition to the contracting culture of the commissioning.

Case C represents a local authority whose approach is much in compliance with the government SVA policy. There is awareness of the policy's existence, and it is applied with some services where commissioners decide. The scoring of social value in the contracts is varied, ranging at 2% or 5% depending on the contracts. This case was revelatory for the implementation of a commissioner contract embedding social value. It showed the reporting on the project between commissioners and charity project managers, with some aspects from the monitoring and evidence of social value throughout the project. The interaction with the VSOs is limited. There is an encouragement for the VSOs towards the contracting culture. There is not much support for this sector to access the market of commissioning for social value.

Figure 3.2 Status case practices and the SVA



Source: Developed by the researcher

3.4.7 Participant recruitment

Recruitment techniques

During the fieldwork, which included both Phases I and II of data collection, the primary recruitment technique was emailed invitation as a first introduction. The email was simple and contained a summary of the study’s aims, data confidentiality information and the proposed time for the interview. For the participants who had an initial in-person meeting or those who were presented via a third party during a workshop or conference, the next step was to follow up with an introductory email. Any requests for further information about the study were also addressed by email.

A standard consent form was attached to the email to reassure the participants regarding using their data in the study and fulfilling the ethical requirements.

The participant sample was identified through the website directories of various organisations, including Social Value UK (SVUK) and Social Enterprise UK. In the early stages of the study, the researcher contacted a large number of consultants with expertise in social value measurement and voluntary services.

In addition, the researcher identified the relevant charities by contacting charitable organisations mentioned in individual case reports or by following the recommendations of the local infrastructure organisations. Another method used was the networking platforms offered by various conferences (e.g. Social Value Summit), workshops (e.g. VSO training workshops) and training seminars (e.g. NEF). As mentioned earlier, several participants were also recruited through the snowball technique via essential referrals made by key individuals with expertise in the field.

3.5 Data collection methods

Data for this study were collected through multiple sources in the different phases, which helped provide a more in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation. Interviews and observations were performed to gain insights into the relevant aspects of the research topic.

3.5.1 Interviews

This study adopts an explorative perspective and uses qualitative interviews, which allow researchers to obtain “examples or occurrences of events and to explore a person’s understanding of the construct under investigation” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 142) and to gain an understanding from the participant’s perspective. The explorative perspective of the interviews can be used to discover new and unexpected information on the phenomenon under investigation.

With regards to the standardisation of the interview questions, a semi-structured format was used for this study, instead of a highly structured or an unstructured template such as an informal conversation, a complimentary chat about the problems at hand or a survey/questionnaire (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008).

Semi-structured interviews can ensure coverage of the phenomenon analysed while at the same time allowing a certain degree of flexibility to explore other important issues.

Due to the use of semi-structured interviews, it was possible to extend and/or change the questions as new aspects of the investigation emerged based on earlier discussions (Hussey and Hussey, 1997, p. 156). This approach is complex, time-consuming and the researcher needed to carefully structure the questions to address the research objectives in a valid manner (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 139). The researcher is aware that the informant's perceptions may guide the interview direction favourably with this technique. In such cases, Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) suggest implementing the laddering technique, i.e. asking for clarifications to better understand the issues under discussion. The researcher may employ the laddering method by asking '*why*' questions, allowing the participants to segue from factual statements into revealing their value base.

Furthermore, explanatory probes during the data collection process and strategic insertion of follow-up questions such as 'What did you mean by that?' and 'What makes you say that?' enable the researcher to explore the participants' perspectives in greater detail. The survey method was deemed inappropriate given the inductive and exploratory nature of the research. Interviews, by contrast, allow scholars to guide the participants towards presenting the information necessary for the research.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore the lived experiences of the participants regarding the issue under investigation. This is a helpful technique for uncovering the meanings and interpretations attached to the social value practices in the commissioning process. The interview structure followed a nearly identical pattern for all the participants' thanks to adequate pre-planning. The researcher gauged the appropriate level of formality with each participant depending on the latter's expertise. This allowed the interviewees to speak discursively and express their thoughts freely.

Pre-structured guiding questions were devised to highlight critical discussion areas and explore the participant's respective areas of expertise. Although these varied across the range of contexts encountered during the interviews, the researcher needed to cover critical topics while imposing no overt control over the participants. Given the time pressure and the complexity of the problems discussed, in addition to the unfeasibility of conducting second interviews, this set of questions played a key role in guiding the conversation towards crucial issues. However, it is worth noting that these questions remained guidelines, and the researcher did not always rigidly adhere to them.

The interviews began with a brief introduction of the research aims, followed by a reassurance of the anonymity of participants. Background information regarding the participants and their experience in commissioning, particularly concerning social value, was subsequently collected.

The interview was presented in a near-identical fashion to the various participant samples across the different research phases. Nonetheless, some slight adaptations were made based on the respective expertise of the participants. The main categories of the exploratory interview guide encompass the following:

- First, the concept of social value is problematic in itself, as it lacks a unified definition. Therefore, a common understanding of the term *social value* had to be reached.
- Second, the use of this concept in the commissioning process and the implementation of contract management was investigated. The process reveals an understanding of the application of social value.
- Third, the use of the concept in contracting relationships was examined. It involved an exploration of social value contracts and the relationships between the local contracting authorities and the VSOs. Any tensions within these relationships also needed to be identified.

With regards to the application of social value in the commissioning process in its early stages, further empirical research is needed to understand the practice. The interviews aimed to explore diverse perspectives and collect data from the pertinent players within the policy organisations.

The interviews were held at a physical location agreed to by the participant, via Skype or telephone. In all the case studies, a portion of the participants was interviewed at their workplaces. The interviews were held during office breaks in the participants' offices, the workplace cafeterias, or another nearby location for all the local authorities. Most of the participants from VSOs were interviewed within their organisational premises. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person, and the researcher travelled to the informant's location in each instance.

The researcher undertook the transcription of the audio recordings of the conversations. The transcription was a challenging and time-consuming task, especially in identifying the nuances and grasping the senses expressed in the language, considering that the transcriber is not a native English speaker. While the transcription accuracy is undoubtedly important, the researcher opted not to strive for complete perfection. The main aim was to gain a general sense of the participants' opinions rather than to precisely examine each word and phrase, such as needed for factor or content analysis. While doing the transcripts was tedious at times, it was beneficial for familiarising the researcher with the data.

3.5.2 Observations

This study aims to gather insights from the primary data and, at the same time, to call attention to other processes of data collection for a more in-depth analysis of the issue in question. From the earlier stages in the formulation of the research design, the investigator decided to conduct a practical exploration and study individuals and processes in the organization.

During the early stages of the research, the researcher became interested in performing an ethnographic study “producing a picture of the way of life of some group” (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p. 202). However, owing to limited site access as a long-term insider within the organisations, this study was informed by some opportunities for observations that yielded insights from events and meetings on the issue under exploration. This was possible depending on the nature of the access permitted in the various contexts. The role of ‘participant as an observer’ explicitly states the intention of observation and participation in the context as both researcher and participant (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 162).

Participant observation, also known as field research or ethnography, involves one or more periods of sustained immersion on the researcher’s part within the organisation that is being studied. Blaikie and Priest (2019) note that participant observation can be practised in multiple ways and combine various observation techniques. It involves “the researcher taking part in the activities of the research participants” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018, p. 172). The methods of participant observation are defined on a continuum, from minimal observation on one end, through answering specific questions, to general observations of an entire social system on the other (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Depending on the scope of access, the researcher’s role in the organization varies.

During fieldwork, the researcher needs to build and maintain connections and choose the appropriate participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 104). They need to make decisions regarding “(...) whom to talk to, and what to ask, what to record and how” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 35). Gaining access to the organisation might be difficult, and there may be challenges in the field context concerning the nature of the relationships within the social landscape as well as how to avoid marginalisation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 89). The accounts from individuals within a particular context can constitute a “source of information about events and as revealing the perspective and discursive practices of those who produced them” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 120).

The negotiation process for gaining insider access to any organisational setting is not an easy feat. In the three case studies undertaken, the researcher tried to immerse herself in the working reality of the respective

organisation as a participant-observer over six months in 2018. Unfortunately, this immersion task proved to be unsuccessful. At the time of data collection, the first cases approached for the fieldwork component were not open to access. During the early stages of the research, the researcher intended to access cases that have been recognised as best practices in commissioning social value. However, after connecting with several commissioners in a local contracting authority, the researcher was informed of current changes and political restructuring due to the mayoral elections. These contacts felt that the timing was inappropriate for open access to the required information. Furthermore, Case C specifically involved some concerns related to the confidentiality of the procurement processes.

Therefore, the researcher assumed the role of an outsider in conducting the fieldwork. Also, some opportunities for meeting observations were offered. Such contexts involved meetings to set out a policy framework of social value in the local contracting authority (Case A) or meetings to report on social value for a project implemented between a local contracting authority and a VSO (Case C).

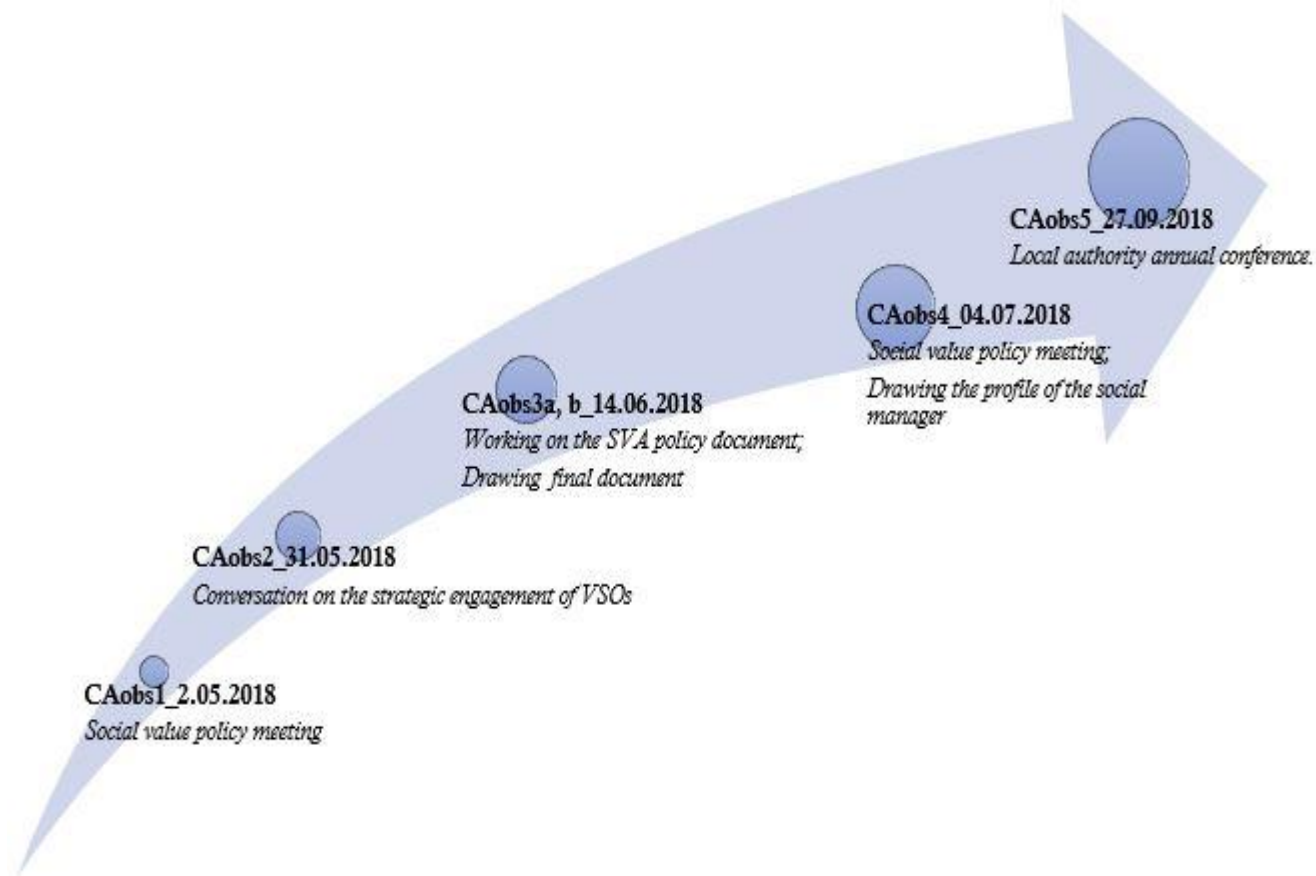
The researcher's role differed in each case study, and hence diverse observations were gathered across situations, depending on the opportunities that were presented in each local authority setting. Furthermore, the researcher needed to adapt to the variable availabilities of the employees in each organisation. During the fieldwork, the researcher recorded digital field notes and wrote memos at the end of the observation sessions.

The following paragraphs highlight the temporality of the observations, conferences or workshops attended for each case.

Fieldwork observations for each case

Figure 3.3 below highlights some of the fieldwork meetings in Case A. The fieldwork observations for this case were made during teamwork to develop a social value policy for the organisation's procurement practices. Few observations were made in the early fieldwork stage, as the meetings stopped due to local authority internal changes, mainly related to the budget dedicated to the matter. An annual conference of the local authority has been attended related to their reporting on the outcomes and performance attained.

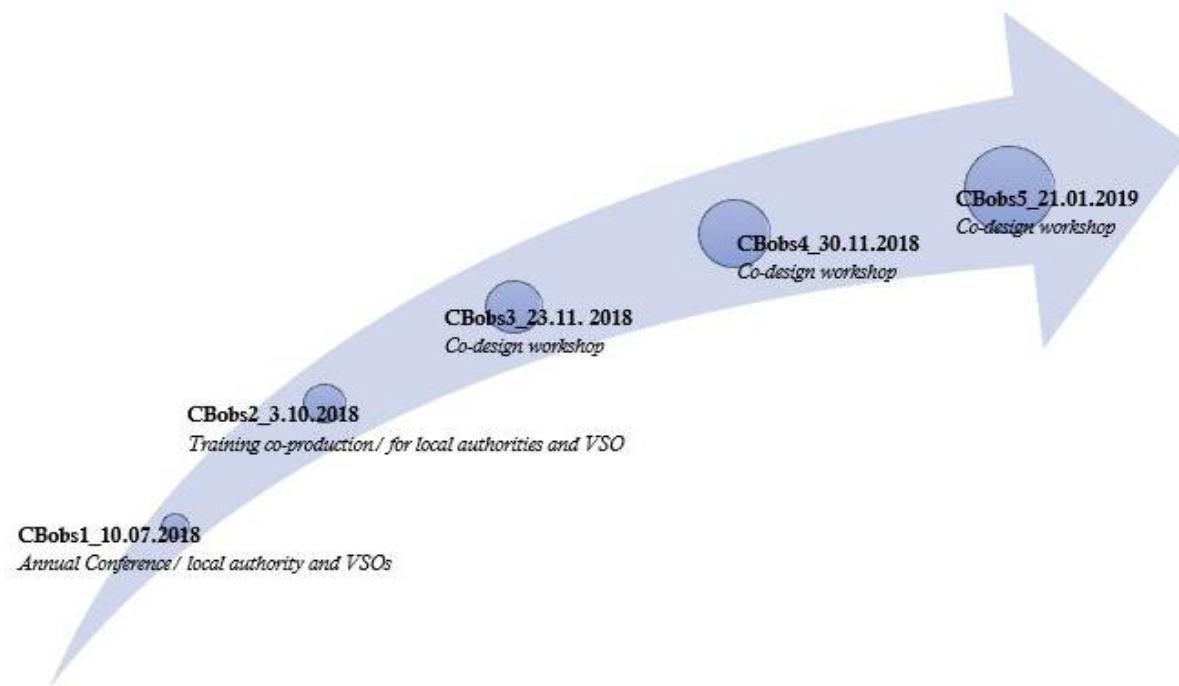
Figure 3.3 Case A – Meeting observations (Phase II)



Source: Developed by the researcher

In the fieldwork for Case B, the observations occurred during the workshops and conferences held between the local authority and the VSOs. Figure 3.4 highlights some of the fieldwork meetings attended by the researcher. An annual conference meeting has been attended where the political agenda to strengthen the strategic relationships with the VSOs, and the co-production approach to the commissioning process has been emphasized.

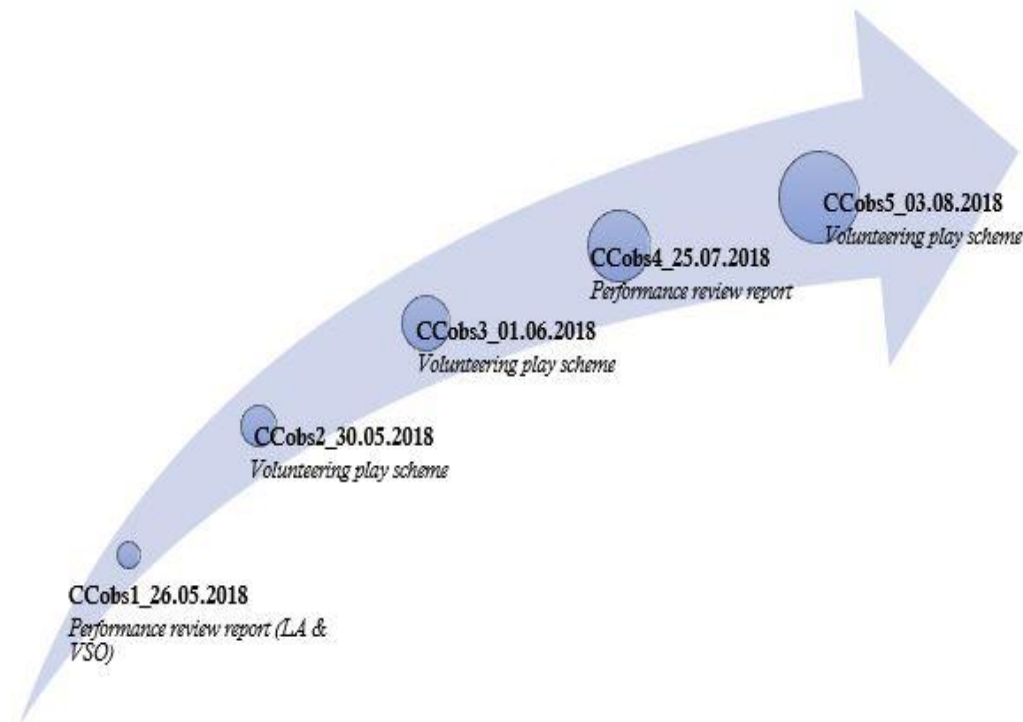
Figure 3.4 Case B – Meeting observations (Phase II)



Source: Developed by the researcher

The fieldwork observations for Case C took place during a contract-delivery meeting held between the commissioner and the front-line charity workers to report on the project. Some volunteering sessions were also included. Figure 3.5 highlights some of the fieldwork meetings in this case.

Figure 3.5 Case C – Meeting observations (Phase II)



Source: Developed by the researcher

3.5.3 Email communications

Email conversations were essential to the fieldwork; they provide evidence of the progress achieved in the data collection process and document the various barriers to data access. They contain some of the challenges faced by the researcher in accessing and observing the processes concerning the procurement of services with social value.

3.6 Data analysis

3.6.1 Qualitative analytical methods: The approach in this study

There are many different methods of qualitative data analysis available to researchers.

Braun and Clarke (2013, pp. 175-177) concisely document each primary data analysis method for qualitative research. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset” arising from the research questions. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), on the other hand, “focuses on how people make sense of their lived experiences”. Grounded theory, which originated in sociology, “focuses on building theory from data, and because of its sociological origins, there is an emphasis on understanding social process”. Pattern-based discourse analysis is concerned with “patterns in language use connected to the social production of the analysis” and how events are constructed.

This study uses thematic analysis (adapted from Braun and Clarke 2006) as its data analysis approach. Flexible by nature, the thematic analysis is exploratory and usually aims at understanding data. This method “provides a systematic approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns - themes - across a dataset” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 174). The thematic analysis adopted in this study “aims to generate an analysis from the bottom up and it is not shaped by existing theory (but it is always shaped to some extent by the researcher’s standpoint, disciplinary knowledge and epistemology)” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 175). It allows the researcher to approach and analyse data holistically and “to capture and to interpret the informant’s meanings” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 206). According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 13), this approach rests upon “underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations” using different phase processes.

The data was analysed following a six-phase thematic analysis approach as follows (Braun and Clarke, 2006):

1. Familiarising oneself with the data: Transcribing, reading and rereading the data, noting down ideas.
2. Generating the initial codes: Systematically coding the data across the entire dataset, collating the data relevant to each code.
3. Identifying the themes: Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all the data relevant to each one.
4. Reviewing the themes.
5. Defining and naming the themes: Conducting an ongoing analysis to refine the themes and generate distinct names for each one.
6. Drafting the report of the analysis using selected extracts.

As with any other approach, there are criticisms towards this approach. Therefore, the rigour of the analytical method needs to be demonstrated through a process consisting of six phases, and it should be recursive, i.e. the researcher should move back and forth through the various phases rather than follow a linear process. As Lapadat (2012, p. 3) notes, “through a process of noticing patterns, defining emerging themes, constantly comparing data against codes and categories, recording interpretative insights in research memos, the

researcher builds a complex exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory case analysis approach”. This type of analysis scans for patterns and themes across the dataset. The researcher is aware that this approach could be subject to concerns over its trustworthiness and rigour since the relevant themes to be identified are decided solely by the researcher based on their interests. The process involves careful and systematic consideration of managing the data and establishing the most appropriate approach.

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used to support the analysis. Therefore, programs such as NVivo11 facilitate data coding, creating conceptual maps, and exploring their relationships. The use of software offers both benefits and limitations. On the positive side, it enables data organisation, quick code searches, increased efficiency, and transparency and reassurance regarding the comprehensiveness of the codes. On the negative side, it takes time to learn the software, and there is a risk of the “distancing of data” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 219). There are two approaches to coding: selective and complete. A node is a collection of references to a specific theme, place, person or different field (Bazeley, 2007). Selective coding “selects what counts as an instance of what you are looking for”, whereas complete coding “identifies anything and everything of interest or relevance to answering the research questions” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 206).

The coding process can reflect a semantic (i.e. data-derived) approach or a more conceptual (theoretical) interpretation of the data, known as a researcher-derived or a latent code (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 207). The process offers flexibility to review the data, perform re-coding and rearrange themes (Saunders et al., 2004, pp. 402-406).

The recording and data organisation parts of the process can take various forms (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, pp. 147-150). The data may comprise promotional materials, guides, official documents, website information or hand-written notes. The advantage of the audio recording should also be noted, as it presents a significant opportunity to store data, although transcription is a time-consuming process. The data analysis approach attempts to make sense of the field data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 202).

For this study, the data—interview transcripts, notes from informal conversations and documents received from local contracting authorities or charities—were analysed using the NVivo11 software. The thematic codes emerged from the transcripts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The software was used to assess the codes of relevant text passages, summarise these codes and create themes. Concepts, patterns and explanations were then identified from the data and interpreted.

The following table (Table 3.6) provides a schematic overview of the total data collected from the two phases conducted in 2018. The table emphasises the number of interviews conducted during the first phase of data collection and the interviews and observations in the second phase. Nineteen interviews and informal conversations were held during the first phase with experts at various policy organisational levels, from commissioners to VSO managers. The second phase consisted of fifty-five interviews for the three case studies with diverse professionals in local contracting authorities and VSOs within a local authority and seventeen meeting observations.

Table 3.6 Overview of the data collection process and related techniques

Phases	Techniques	Overview Type of data			
		Location: England			
Phase I data collection - various policy organisations	<i>§ primary data: semi-structured interviews</i>	<i>Type of participants</i>			
		Local authorities, VSOs, voluntary sector umbrella organisations, research institutes, think tanks, consultancies			
		Total	19		
Phase II data collection - case studies	<i>§ primary data: semi-structured interviews and observations</i>	Cases practices	CASE A	CASE B	CASE C
		<i>Type of participants</i>			
		Policy teams, Procurement, Commissioning teams, CVS, VSOs			
		Semi-structured interviews			
		LA team staff	11	9	2
		VSO staff	4	3	6
		Total	15	12	8
		Participant observations			
		Local contracting authority team meetings	4	none	none
		Local contracting authority and VSO meetings (e.g., reporting)	none	none	2
		Local contracting authority (e.g., conferences, workshops)	1	5	none
		VSOs volunteering/informal conversations/observations	none	none	5
		Total	5	5	7
Total Interviews (Phases I & II)		54			
Total observations (Phase II)		17			

Source: Developed based on the fieldwork

3.6.2 Description of the analytic process

The process began with the listed sources of materials for the analysis. The first step consisted of importing all the interviews, field notes, observational notes and documents into the Nvivo11 software. The NVivo11 research project was entitled the 'Commissioning for Social Value Project'. The records were obtained systematically in the two phases of data collection and subsequently organised and coded, as described in Chapter 3.

In the first phase of the fieldwork, between January and July 2018, nineteen interviews and informal conversations were conducted with individuals from various policy organisations, including consultants, staff members from the commissioning and procurement teams, and VSO provider managers across England.

The data analysis began from the first phase of the fieldwork, which originated as a scoping phase. The early interviews helped shape and refine the semi-structured questions, leading to a clearer picture of the research design and the appropriate participant sample. This phase played a critical and precursory role in developing the second phase of data collection and the choice of organisations for the case studies. It also helped confirm the earlier assumptions and questions aligned with the purpose of the research.

Therefore, this scoping stage was not a detached phase for the researcher; instead, it was part of a continuous investigation process exploring the commissioning practices through immersion in the actual organizational contexts.

This stage helped the investigator to make further decisions on reshaping the research questions and aligning them with the research gap identified in the field. During the interviews and observations, the first familiarisation occurred while conducting the fieldwork, allowing the researcher to identify patterns in the data.

A mixed-strategies approach was used to code and analyse the data, including the NVivo11 software. This software enabled the thorough study of various features, which led to how best to locate the dataset.

Acronyms were used for all the participants to ensure their anonymity. A diverse set of codifications was used throughout the two phases of data collection. Quotations from the respondents are referenced by a single coding system throughout the analysis (for more details, see the discussion on methodology in Section 3.4.4).

For example, *quotation code IP1* identifies an interviewee's response as follows.

IP1 = Interview participant 1, the director of a social enterprise.

IP8 (CC) = Interview participant 8, a commissioner in a local authority who participated in Case C (CC).
This participant was interviewed in the first phase of the data collection fieldwork.

1 = The numerical order of the participant attending the interviews

For the second phase of the study, the coding of *CA*, *CB* and *CC* refers to the following three case studies, respectively:

CA = Case 1

CB = Case 2

CC = Case 3

Quotation code CA1 (LA) identifies a participant's response as follows.

CA = Case 1

CA 1 = The numerical order of the participant attending the interviews

CA 1(LA) = A participant from a local authority (in this case, a policy officer)

CA 10(VSO) = A participant from the voluntary sector (in this case, a project manager)

For the coding of fieldwork data from the observations, please see Section 3.5.2.

Quotation code CAobs1_2.05.2018 identifies an observation meeting for a particular case study.

CA = Case 1

CAobs1 = The numerical order of the event

CAobs1_2.05.2018 = The date of the event

Stage 1 – Data familiarisation

The familiarisation process with the data started with the transcription of the interviews, as suggested by Braun and Clark (2006). The transcription process was the first stage in the in-depth exploration of the data collected. This process occurred on two levels: In some contexts, the researcher summarised what the participants said and did not record the exact accounts. Meanwhile, other interviews were transcribed word-by-word from the recordings.

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were imported into an NVivo11 file project named ‘Commissioning for Social Value Project’.

At this stage, the researcher mainly read and familiarised herself with the data. The transcriptions were read over several times, and notes were made based on the interview data both on paper and as memos in NVivo11. The early-stage was a general process of managing the documentation and the indexing and coding steps and making sense of the interviews and the other data collected. During this period, the researcher categorised the primary nodes and sensitised herself to the significant preliminary themes associated with the research questions.

Stage 2 – Generation of the initial codes

This level was mainly descriptive and did not involve any interpretations; hence each interview was coded using a descriptive code only. The initial stage consisted of assigning a wide variety of codes covering the issues that arose during the interviews. First-level codes were used to attribute paragraphs of text from the transcribed interviews to a class of elements corresponding to the thematic and conceptual categories identified. This level of coding allowed the researcher to condense the data from whole interviews into single quotations in the form of phrases.

The coding was done by selecting phrases and paragraphs that touch upon the prominent themes under discussion. The choice of coding was by paragraphs rather than single lines. It allowed for a broader understanding of the context of analysis. It constitutes an essential preliminary step in identifying and examining the primary issues noted by the participants.

Stage 3 – Search for themes

In addition, various themes were identified and coded from the data, forming a broad picture of the entire dataset. Holistic coding was used, and these codes were collated into mega-subject categories along with the subthemes that support them. The researcher’s interpretation played a key role in the whole process. Any

relevant items to the research objectives were coded; the potentially relevant materials were separated from any irrelevant information (i.e. selective coding). The coding was done by labelling the data using phrases rather than words. The approach involved both semantic coding of the terms used by the participants and descriptive coding regarding the use of personal data-derived codes.

Stage 4 – Review of the themes

The themes were then reviewed and merged into macro-categories. Then, the themes and the subtheme created in the analysis were refined. At this stage, the subthemes were further analysed through the second level of coding. To gain an in-depth understanding of the data, the second stage of coding involved a detailed examination of all the nodes created in the earlier steps and clarifying the different meanings extracted from the data. A detailed reading of the relevant paragraphs was performed, and each one was further coded. In this phase, many codes were identified as recurrent.

Based on the data from the coding process, the descriptive codes recorded information about the participants, classifying them according to the two stages of the data analysis. The information collected was organised by the informants' attributes, such as the types of organisations they worked (voluntary sector, local contracting authority or consultancy), their job profiles within the organisations (commissioner, project manager or consultant), and their location their gender. This allowed the researcher to quickly identify the types of participants involved in the analysis. The pseudonyms of the anonymised participants were then matched to their respective quotations. However, with the use of the holistic analysis approach, this classification was unnecessary. Moreover, the creation of sets helped to unify all the nodes. These were developed separately from Phases I and II, and they helped develop diagrams illustrating aspects of the main themes.

The first set of nodes was developed from the transcripts. Data was collated in the nodes, and annotations and broad memos were recorded. An Excel file was created to integrate the relevant participant quotations. The second-stage codes were imported, generating a parallel interpretation of the data. Organising the nodes using Excel files helped the researcher perform a more effective reading of the participants' paragraphs and answers and make sense of the narratives in their responses in an integrated and coherent fashion. In contrast, the data visualisation function in NVivo11 presents only fragmented pieces of information. The organisation process was helpful because this was the researcher's first time using NVivo11, and it was sometimes challenging to link different pieces of data together.

Stage 5 - Definitions and naming of the themes

The main themes reflect the commissioning process's critical dimensions for social value underpinning policy, context and the actors' decisions in making sense of social value and embedding it within the commissioning and procurement processes. Each dimension is distinct but inherently related to the context and has influenced the commissioning process for social value to date. Therefore, each theme is uniquely significant for understanding the complexity of this process.

Stage 6 – Report writing

This stage finalised the analysis with a report on the collected data (i.e. semi-structured interviews, the three cases and observations). The report discusses the main issues regarding the pathways of the working relationships between the VSOs and local contracting authorities with the SVA and the embedding of social value in various stages of the commissioning process.

3.6.3 Themes and nodes

This chapter is based on four broad macro findings: *policy context and implications* (F1), *working with social value: understanding and usage* (F2), *manufacturing social value in the commissioning process* (F3) and *the commissioning process and public service contracts that embed social value*. The argument(s) presented in each section are interdependent and contribute to understanding the tensions present in social value implementation.

Within each macro category, some themes highlight the various sources of tensions within the process. These themes are drawn from information on the participants' beliefs, judgements and actions regarding the policy context and how they embed social value within the commissioning and procurement processes. The themes unravel the complex environment of the commissioning process and the tensions within the voluntary sector during the bid for a project containing a social value element.

The main themes correspond to the macro findings of the study. Each of these dimensions is distinct but relevant to the context, influencing how the commissioning process for social value has been conducted to date. Therefore, all the themes are significant in understanding the complexity of the commissioning process. Furthermore, they shed light on the implications of the process for the VSOs and the relationships between these organisations and the local contracting authorities.

3.7 The analytical and theoretical lenses of this study

The scope of this study adopts the strategic action field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011) as an insightful theory that helps researchers understand the actors' *positions* and *actions* within the commissioning field. This approach also sets the context of the commissioning process and the drivers of change that impact the field.

In this study, the researcher considers the commissioning process as a field. Within the field, the front-line workers from both the local contracting authority and the voluntary sector organizations are interacting to establish a contracting funding relationship for service provision.

The research focuses on how the primary front-line workers—i.e. local authority commissioners (incumbents) and VSOs (challengers)—interpret social value, i.e. knowledge of the purposes and positions of the actors within the field. In addition, it explores how they interact to create a shared understanding and implement it in the commissioning process (i.e. social skills to build consensus, shared power and common understanding).

Social skills are a central component of this study to understanding how these actors interpret the SVA in the commissioning process and how social value is adopted, interpreted and framed in their commissioning practices. The social skills of the actors are essential because it influences and frames the approach to embedding social value within the commissioning process. Furthermore, it affects the commissioners' position towards the market, which in turn determines the level of interaction, shared understanding established and implementation of social value in the commissioning process. The key to the commissioning model is the engagement and interaction between the actors. It requires the commissioner's social skills needed to embrace change that can improve the processes and outcomes of the commissioning cycle. The commissioners, as incumbents, need to be open and creative enough to explore the opportunities offered by the SVA. They need to interact successfully to create a consensus on the agenda and a shared understanding of its purpose within the field.

3.8 Quality criteria for the research

3.8.1 Quality and limitations of the research

The quality criteria for qualitative studies consist of reliability, authenticity and trustworthiness.

Critics of qualitative research often refer to its lack of academic rigour and reliability when judged by the traditional standards of internal, external construct, content or other types of validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, Chapter 11; Yin 1994, pp. 32-38; Sarantakos, 1998, pp. 52-53). Data and analysis should be as accessible as possible from the effects of bias, reactivity, perceptual distortions or acquiescence (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pp. 301-303). According to Saunders et al. (2016, p. 202), “reliability and validity are central to the quality of research in the natural sciences and quantitative research in the social sciences”.

Conducting qualitative research from an explorative perspective and within a particular context requires paying special attention to reliability. To this end, Denzin (1978) suggests the triangulation technique. In qualitative research, this is defined as “using more than one source of data and method of collection to confirm the validity/credibility/authenticity of research data, analysis and interpretation” (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 207), thereby allowing for the capture and reporting of multiple perspectives. The use of different data collection methods enriches the researcher’s comprehension of the phenomenon analysed.

Denzin (1978) suggests varied types of triangulation, such as triangulation of methods and sources, among others. The researcher adopted both techniques for this study, incorporating various sources, data, and methods. Triangulation of sources involves collecting data (1) through a literature review, (2) from the documents of the various informants involved and (3) using interviews. During the fieldwork of the present research, data was gathered from various actors (Denzin, 1978, p. 307) at different policy levels. Interviews and input from the case studies were used to compare and verify the data collected (Yin 1994) and substantiate more detailed insights into the phenomenon under analysis. Additionally, ethnographic fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 183) was introduced in participant observations, field notes and reflections.

This combined approach constructs a view of the data which is substantially richer. It provides more reliable results by overcoming inherent bias that arises through a single method (Denzin, 1978, p. 307). Qualitative research allows the use of multiple methodologies: this mixture of qualitative methods is often referred to as *bricolage* through the adoption of a variety of techniques in order to answer the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

According to Thomas (2016, p. 76), the quality of a case study “depends less on ideas of sample, validity and reliability and more on the conception, construction and conduct of the study”. It is essential to discuss positionality within a case study. The researcher takes a central role in interpreting the phenomenon under investigation. Here, their subjectivity (rather than objectivity) comes to the fore, especially in interpretative research. Therefore, it is essential to recognise that the “researcher’s position (background, past experiences,

expectations) affects the nature of the observations and the interpretations made” (Thomas, 2016, p. 68). An interpretative case study is reported differently from an experimental study. The researcher’s subjectivity is more salient in the former.

3.8.2 Researcher bias

Additionally, the researcher may consciously and unconsciously influence the nature and quality of the collected data—a phenomenon known as researcher bias. Researcher bias can shape the overall research design in specific ways, influencing research questions, the philosophical assumptions and methodology selected, and the overall analysis. While the researcher is aware of this fact in this study and tried to minimise her own bias, she also acknowledges that this bias is intrinsic to the research approach adopted. Particularly for in-person meetings, the possibility of bias is high.

Saunders et al. (2016, p. 397) highlight several types of potential bias, including: (1) interviewer bias in the posing of questions as well as in the responses to the participants’ answers and, (2) interviewee or response bias, which can arise from the participants’ perceptions of the interviewer. Nonetheless, an element of bias is inevitable during interviews, especially when the responses are effectively co-created.

Possible sources of researcher bias in this study include the following:

- i) Bias on the issue addressed: Based on the literature review, it was difficult to frame the focus of the topic during the early stages of the study. Therefore, the literature accessed impacted the development of the empirical investigation by influencing the themes that should have guided the interviews.
- ii) Bias when conducting the interviews: Based on the literature review, the researcher decided on the themes of interest to be discussed in the interviews. These ideas were also developed during the interview process and further explored in Phase II of the research.
- iii) Bias in data analysis: The data analysis process was influenced by the debates, reflections and practices noted in the literature as well as the empirical data collected from the fieldwork. In presenting the data and the analysis thereof, the researcher was influenced more heavily by certain participants than others. Some of the opinions expressed by these individuals resonated more strongly with the researcher’s own beliefs than others. It might have influenced the analysis and coding of the data.

Furthermore, bias may have occurred during interviews with the front-line workers for the following reasons:

- i) Some VSOs may have been biased following negative experiences with the commissioning contract projects. They may have applied the concept of social value in their proposals and tried to attend some tendering calls for contracts. Furthermore, they may have been frustrated by the unfolding of the process and the final recipients of the contracts. Conversely, some of these organisations may have been successful, and they may have expressed the opposite opinions regarding the process as a result of their winning bids.
- ii) Front-line workers in the commissioning process from both local contracting authorities and VSOs may have had different understandings of the concept of social value. Most of them had difficulty articulating this concept, although they displayed a tacit understanding of what it means.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Qualitative research can also highlight specific ethical issues. Saunders et al. (2016, p. 201) state that research ethics are a “critical part of formulating the research design”. The informed consent of the participants, their availability, their readiness to be part of the research, respect of privacy, and confidentiality and anonymity of the collected data are all issues of ethical concern. According to Homan (2001), the principle of informed consent requires that human subjects are informed of the nature and implications of the research and that participation is voluntary before becoming involved. The principle of gaining access to and being accepted by an organisation involves obtaining permission to conduct the study in the institution. It involves allowing investigators into a given physical space and permitting them to conduct their investigations in a particular manner (Homan, 2001).

The Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this research project, registered under HREC/2781/Mititelu. The OU Research Ethics Committee confirmed that the research procedures are compliant with the Data Protection Act (1998) requirements. This act, which came into effect on 1 March 2000, considers the issue of anonymity and privacy as more than merely a matter of ethics; it can also have legal implications. Its fundamental principle is to protect the rights of individuals concerning their data. Following this principle, the researcher has ensured that all the data gathered during the study period would be used solely for research purposes and not disclosed to or discussed with any third parties.

Informed consent forms

In adhering to the above ethical principle, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study. They signed consent forms that stated the terms of data confidentiality and agreed to record the conversations. A commitment was made to respect privacy and to anonymise the data. A pseudonym was assigned to all the participants involved in the study. In addition, the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Confidentiality, privacy and anonymity

The participants were reassured of their anonymity and confidentiality.

The datasets gathered in the research include the following formats and methods:

Dataset 1: One digital recording of the transcripts of the interviews, plus one copy stored in NVivo11.

Dataset 2: One digital recording of data gathered during the fieldwork and held in a specific folder. It includes interviews, observation field notes and documents. Another copy is stored in NVivo11.

The data collected has been anonymised and stored using different codes and dates. The anonymisation of the case organisations and interviews using different names, codes and dates was performed after the data processing. The digital data were stored online in a password-protected folder.

3.10 Reflexivity

This project offers a qualitative view on the phenomenon under analysis. During qualitative processing of the data, the researcher reflected on her role and its impact on the research process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In qualitative research, reflexivity means that “individual researchers inevitably inject something of themselves into the research process and, hence, into the outcomes” (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p. 212). It involves “critical self-scrutiny by the researcher, or active reflexivity” (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p. 47).

The researcher has been aware that the epistemological framework of the issue may have implicitly influenced the interview questions and, by extension, the data analysis. As the analysis focused on recognising and understanding the issues from the participants' perspectives, it focused mainly on their interpretation of their own experiences with the issues concerned. In addition, the study integrated the researcher's interpretation regarding the words and actions of the participants. A holistic approach was emphasised and the analytic process involved the consideration of multiple elements simultaneously. In short, the researcher interpreted the meanings constructed within the participants' subjective experience, with the researcher acting as an instrument.

Reflection on the process

In the early stages, the researcher intended to explore the social value concept and processes involved in its creation through various case studies. Different research strategies were considered, including action research and ethnography. However, this broad view led the researcher down many time-consuming paths; therefore, there was a need to narrow down the research aim and objectives while retaining the commitment to delve into the procedural practices and understand the participants' experiences.

In addition, the researcher also considered the literature review reports on the commissioning process for social value and knowledge gathered from diverse workshops and seminars.

Fieldwork challenges

Once the decision was made regarding the study participants, potential interviewees were contacted. It soon became apparent that it would be difficult to persuade everyone to participate or gain access to the organisations where they worked. In retrospect, the delays caused by the reluctance of certain individuals to be interviewed were expected, given the time constraints and the potential sensitivity surrounding the issue in question.

Despite the researcher's initial intention to ask the same set of questions during the interviews, it proved challenging to ask every participant about their role in the same sequence. People tended to speak broadly about the social value or any problems in the relationships between the local contracting authority and the VSOs. These opinions tended to reflect their general view of social value.

Despite having expressed their commitment at the start of the interviews, some participants were unable to provide any conclusive information. A significant reason for this outcome is that the political factors, local contracting authority elections and restructuring processes at the time were unfavourable. Other factors may have contributed to this, but the researcher is unable to identify them at the moment.

One example of this lack of success involved the telephone conversations and an in-person meeting with a commissioner in one local authority. The interview consisted of a 30-minute general conversation that could not be recorded, and no consent form was signed. Attempts to set up a subsequent meeting, an offer to send the interview structure to the participant for a written response, and a request for the completed consent form to be sent by email were all unsuccessful. A major restructuring was happening in the local contracting authority, which negatively influenced the successful pursuit of the contract.

4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the primary data gathered during the fieldwork. It examines the data from the transcribed interviews and participant observation notes. An explorative and interpretative analysis explores how the front-line workers understand SVA. Also, it draws insights on its implementation in their commissioning practice. In this chapter, several themes that emerged from the data analysis process are outlined and discussed. For each theme, the findings are merged holistically, driven from both the first and second phase of the fieldwork data collection and integrated with the findings from the literature (complementary or contradictory to it). The findings are discussed by linking the ideas back to the participants' interview data using quotations from the transcripts.

The chapter is grouped into different macro findings. The first category of findings (Findings 1) relates to the stakeholder/national views of the SVA policy/regulation level. The second category of findings (Findings 2) investigates how front-line workers approach social value policy in the local contracting authority. The third category of findings (Findings 3) looks at the manufacturing of social value in the commissioning process, leading to a debate on the importance of the collecting dimension in understanding and implementing social value in the commissioning process.

In each category of findings, the data from the first and second phases of data collection are mixed. The data, however, at each level of analysis have a strict reference to the work that the front-line workers do in implementing SVA in the commissioning process. The first section of the findings has a general focus on the policy framework. In contrast, the other two categories focus on the front-line workers approach in the local commissioning and the VSOs.

4.2 Findings 1– Policy context in the commissioning process

This section gathers the relevant findings at a broad policy level from various participants, from consultants and the front-line workers in the voluntary sector and local contracting authorities to the infrastructure organisations.

It highlights the general understanding of the policy and its relevance to the commissioning process. There is a consensus that the policy is an essential addition to the commissioning practices at a broad level. The way the public talk about it shows that the policy and the idea of evidencing social value have gained momentum and is gradually raising awareness regarding the importance of social value in the procurement and commissioning process.

4.2.1 Theme 1 – Policy implementation in practice

This section discusses the relevance of the SVA policy in the commissioning process. It looks at key insiders, national policymakers, consultants and expert professionals' views on the aims of the policy and its design. It looks at how they understand the policy, what they expect the policy to do and not to do, and its scope and effects. Using quotes from the respondents, it describes the gaps concerning the relevance of the policy and how it is understood. The analysis is summarised at the end of each thematic section.

The current local context of commissioning for social value is a relatively complex system in which public service delivery occurs and involves a continuous process of shifts. The change that the policy aims to bring to the commissioning process is perceived as positive. However, the change has not been immediate; it is gradual as each local place is unique, and its contextual situations are unique. There is an increased awareness and thinking that reflects the recognition and the need for change to answer the complexities of the new world. A variety of drivers of change puts pressure on both the funders and the supply chain. It is not just about SVA and social value within a single locality. Sometimes, such a small piece of legislation is seen as an amalgamation of various things that pressure both sides (VSOs and funders). Overall, the law has enabled a strategic means of reaching good commissioning for local communities.

SVA policy and shifts have emerged as an essential element as it is directly connected to understanding the concept of social value in practice and its implementation. The broad framing of the policy allows each local authority to think about it and apply it based on their local requirements. At the level of commissioning services, the front lines understand and apply the policy as per the service characteristics and needs. Where the role of the policy is not understood for a commissioned service, the likelihood of not considering the policy and not appreciating the importance of embedding social value in the commissioning is very high. This attitude towards the policy is due to its non-prescriptive nature, which appeared in some interviews.

The difference made by the policy is still slow but appears to be gradually increasing. It is linked to the non-prescriptive nature of the policy because there is no particular blueprint on how to take it into account.

“I do not think it has made much difference, to be honest. Moreover, that is because there are no teeth to it. There is nothing that forces organisations to follow it or to pursue any particular aspect of social value. It only requires commissioners to consider social value aspects; it does not require them to take them into account in any particular way. So, if any public sector commissioner chooses to ignore SVA, there is actually nothing you can do about it.”
(IP3, Consultant)

The concept of social value in the policy shifts the thinking to recognising the importance of working with inputs and outputs. It encourages commissioners to have a broader and long-term perspective on the outcomes. Therefore, it fills a significant gap in how the commissioners were thinking about outcomes and enables a broader comprehensive understanding of the particular services contracted.

“[...] I think, to that extent, social value is a useful concept because it encourages commissioners, encourages policymakers to think of a wider range of outcomes when they otherwise would not have.” (IP12, Senior Researcher in public services)

An innovative dimension is raised through the character of the policy. In various ways, the policy invites an innovative approach to how it is perceived and acted upon.

There is a recognition that the policy triggers different types of conversations to do things differently and to employ different approaches to issues in the commissioning. Having social value in mind helps commissioners and other people working on the ground to think about issues differently, opening them up to innovative ideas on how to design and deliver services.

“So, it is not necessarily what SVA is compelling commissioners to do. It is more about how the organisations are getting people to think differently and have different types of conversations, [...] develop new types of approaches to issues. So, [...] it is an underexplored target, but I think it is an important part of it. So, I think it helped to move the public debate along a little bit, and I do not think that should not be underappreciated because it has been an important element of the SVA”. (IP12, Senior researcher public services)

There is also recognition that social value was intrinsically present in the services contracted before the SVA came into place. The SVA policy has brought about a formal legislative framework to work with the concept visibly and account for it. Before the Act, the focus had been on using community benefits clauses.

“[...] even before the SVA came into place the local authorities were doing the same thing, they were using the community benefits clauses, so, it happened before. [...] some part of the SVA was not strictly necessary as legally, it was possible to do all this stuff before.” (IP12, Senior Researcher in public services)

Also, in this new context, the innovative character of the policy has been enabled by its non-prescriptive and broad framing, which allows front-line workers to work with it according to the requirements of their local service delivery circumstances. The local contracting authorities can develop their approaches innovatively and tailor their social value to the service design. However, allowing such an open and flexible approach to adopting it innovatively to their local context raises concerns and doubts about how to interpret and effectively use the policy. More guidance appears to be necessary. Best local practices are increasing with their innovative approach to adopting and implementing the policy, but this illustrates the potential gaps in adopting models from one place to another.

Improving commissioning vs increased contracts to VSOs

In terms of the policy's contribution to the relationships between the local authorities and the VSOs in contracting services, the implications are varied.

The policy was intended to open more doors to support voluntary organisations to win commissioning contracts. The SVA policy is intended to produce a decisive transformation in the front-line workers' decision-making when distributing resources and their approach to working with the supply chain. It mainly applied to the VSOs, with specific attention paid to the social enterprises.

It has been recognized that the SVA is intended to create a more level playing field for VSOs. The aspiration of the government (the Public Service White Paper, which the coalition government enacted in 2011) was that all community, voluntary sector organisations and social enterprises would win and deliver public service contracts. The significant historical role played by VSOs as a critical provider of public services became recognised in the debate.

The participants in the local contracting authorities recognised that the policy had been aimed to produce a shift to formal contracting between the local authorities and VSOs. However, the fiscal pressure and the search for a reduction in public spending do not often favour the small VSOs. There is always that belief and hope that the VSOs incur lower costs as providers of services. However, the procedures of procurement raise many management issues in those organisations.

The following statements show that, in the case of commissioning for social value, despite its general intent, there is no explicit requirement to award contracts just to VSOs.

“[...] because the SVA, most people think it says, oh, this means that commissioners have to give social enterprises and charities the ability to bid for contracts better. It does not. [...] because there is no enforcement of the Act. But [...], the opportunity exists for the sector locally to collectively engage with commissioners at the point where services are being designed.” (IP7, Consultant in a social enterprise)

The commissioning process may face different barriers in seeking to enable a good commissioning process. There is a local path dependency that influences the direction from which a policy is approached. It depends on the type of services and the nature of the local social need.

First, the commissioning process is, initially, a highly prescriptive process. Having a policy dedicated just to support a particular type of supplier would be seen as anti-competitive. It would be contrary to the principles of the commissioning process itself, which is competitive under EU procurement rules and UK government regulations. The process of procurement encourages competitive tendering to secure the best value contract.

Second, traditional procurement practices only concentrate on cost reduction. Interest is in the low-cost oriented contracts in the procurement of services. Focus on the budget allocated to the services in the contracting regime and how the commissioning process is delivered is of significance when implementing the SVA policy. So, the awarding of social value contracts is influenced by that approach. In such a context, VSOs find it challenging to cope with the implementation style of commissioning practices.

The current commissioning process is a *“[...] prescriptive regime about the value for money framework [...] it is very prescriptive about price and methods of tendering.”* (IP14, Director of a charity).

Many participants in this study saw spending money and cutting budgets as a priority. The budgets were tight because of austerity, and spending money required more careful consideration of where to invest wisely.

SVA implementation has been often seen as a means of addressing these concerns as a priority. It has been interpreted as encouraging, with the aim of cost reduction, the choice of the best contract delivery at the most reasonable price, while delivering the most impactful results for the service clients and community overall. Also, it encourages the decision-making of the front-line workers to opt for better outcomes and value creation in the long term. The decision to invest in excellent public service providers and the local community is critically important. The biggest lever that government has when it comes to shaping communities is money, and where it spends its money is critically important. The data show that decision-making is mainly political; it is about power, whom you help, whom you do not help, and what type of community you want to see.

Thus, some concluding remarks on these dynamics. It should be noted that the policy had a different effect on the commissioning. SVA appeared as a strategic means to reduce the service cost and address local needs by achieving better social, economic and environmental outcomes. SVA first prompts the thinking of the front-line workers to achieve better outcomes for the services delivered, but its secondary intent was to improve commissioning as a process. SVA was designed to produce more social value and create a level playing field for social enterprises to gain more contracts. However, its effects have been more incisive in improving commissioning; it has impacted how commissioners deliver the services.

Another critical point of this section shows that the practitioners did not find the policy a novelty and revolutionary. It had already been in place in the form of an intrinsic understanding of social value. There was a recognition that this opened many opportunities. It unlocked the potential of the services and their impact on the local community. The policy was expected to provide a level playing field to voluntary sector organizations to win contracts. However, they used it to make small changes to commissioning operations and bend behaviour and decisions. In recent years, the SVA, although not prescriptive, appears to have become a strategic means of reducing the cost of services and addressing local needs.

As a process and in terms of its aims, the SVA policy has strengthened good practice in commissioning. It encourages good commissioning and steers it towards local social functions and collective goals.

“What I would say is that if we did not have the SVA, you could probably still have contracts which embraced the notion, the philosophy of social value, if you had good commissioning. So, a kind of social value is good commissioning, and the SVA encourages commissioners to do good commissioning. [...] if you have poor quality commissioning, you are still not going to get social, economic, environmental value. Likewise, if you have got good commissioning and you do not have a policy, you can still end up with the same outcomes”. (IP10, Manager in an infrastructure organisation)

In terms of steering the collective dimension and voice of the community in the commissioning, there is an important aspect that the SVA policy puts forward, which is the pre-commissioning stage. Although the SVA mentions it in a non-prescriptive manner, the process is essential as it leaves the opportunity for innovative action at the pre-procurement stage. It enables using the engagement mechanisms with the suppliers and other stakeholders to design and deliver services. By enabling such a process, there is an awareness that it will understand social value and its benefits.

“Internally [...]it is more an understanding of what social value is. [...] that will come, fortunately, with the workshops.” (CB7(LA), Manager)

This approach put at its core the debate about engagement, and it requires a more long-term perspective and resources invested in the process. SVA, somehow, although in a non-prescriptive manner, offers a change in practice, highlighting the option of working with suppliers and the people who receive the services. So far, regarding this, the picture is quite fragmented. On a general level, despite the opportunities to use the SVA to inform decision-making and improve the connection with the supply chain, findings point out that it is only happening at a low level. It is because of different barriers in the commissioning process, which can be internal to the commissioning process (e.g., financial resources, time, not mandated buy encouraged, risk-taking) or external to it.

Flexibility, compliance and gaps in implementation

This section draws attention to the policy compliance requirements and the gaps in implementation. It allows us to understand the restraints and tensions in complying with the policy. The essential element that highlights the flexibility of the policy is the language used. The SVA policy uses the phrase *social value* but does not supply any clarification on what this means. The policy might be adopted by one person and not by another because it is not prescriptive. The front-line workers that apply the policy consistently in their service design and contract delivery are open to it and see its potential. However, not all are attracted to it as they have difficulty in understanding and following it.

What the policy explicitly points out is the need for local contracting authority commissioners “to have regard to” and therefore “to exercise discretionary judgement” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 14) in their field, achieving social value outcomes when awarding the procurement contracts. Thus, it proposes a duty to consider social value as a supplement and add to the contract. In aiming for this, commissioners should consider *how* the services delivered might improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of beneficiaries and beyond while assuring the efficient and effective usage of the targeted resources. Thus, the policy implications lead us to note the considerable discretion that the front-line workers have in working with the policy. Their discretion in determining the clients’ benefit that a service might deliver. The accountability mechanism imposed by the SVA policy pushes the commissioners to consider or not social value in their procurement practices when applying their discretionary powers.

“I think maybe emphasis in the Act is not strong enough, so I notice that it uses as public bodies should consider such a thing rather than have to apply it. Moreover, that means, ultimately, from the perspective of the

commissioners, even if they go down the road, it is just about the lowest cost possible, that is fine, as long they make it sounds that they consider social value.” (IP12, Senior Researcher in public services)

A professional consultant of a small social enterprise consultancy offered a similar argument:

“The only thing the Act does say (to commissioners) [...] is they should, not have to, not must, but should consider how that service specification could create additional social value in the local area. That is all it says. [...] My experience is most commissioners then sit there, when they are designing a scope of service, and says, hmm, we have to consider this. Could it? Okay, we have thought about it. No, carry on”. (IP7, Consultant in social enterprises)

Local contracting authorities approach the policy in different ways. At a general level, local commissioners embrace the policy to be compliant with the legislation. However, there is a recognition that best practices embedding social value are emerging.

Some tensions in compliance with SVA legislation have emerged. The findings show that there are still significant differences among the local contracting authorities, with some embracing social value as a clear core focus in their procurement practices and others that consider it at a minimum level. However, some local contracting authorities that are at the initial stages of considering and embedding it in their procurement practices (see case A) are enthusiastic about it.

4.3 Findings 2 – Local front lines working with social value: understanding, articulation and usage

This section focuses on the local front-line approaches to the SVA policy. It draws on data from the local contracting authorities’ staff and front-line workers. Perspectives of the national experts regarding the commissioners work in understanding and using social value policy are also considered.

It starts from the premise that the front-line commissioners are the ones who apply the policy in commissioning and procurement tenders. They are expected to consider social value in each contract to be procured. They are the ones who can decide if a service might include the social value criterion or not, and if they decide not to include it, they should justify it.

The policy is not prescriptive, as already mentioned, so it offers wide-open opportunities in various ways. Commissioners might misinterpret the policy and pick other best practices from elsewhere without evaluating

their local conditions and their actual, local needs. It might happen because they do not understand the social value and articulate it for their services. Understanding local needs means using engagement, and that requires time and resources.

The following section discusses how the local front-line workers approach the SVA policy operationally – from the idea to implementation. It looks at the different ways of understanding and attributing meaning to the concept, the range of activities involved, and overall approaches to implementing social value in the commissioning process. The competing accounts concerning social value are underlined.

4.3.1 Theme 3 – Ways of understanding and use of social value.

This section delves into the coherence process that the local front-line workers and other practitioners exercise regarding social value. Since social value is understood in different ways, the argument is that it may lead to a wide array of outcomes when translated into practice.

The coherence that the practice gives to the policy is crucial to successful implementation. The front-line commissioners interact with the policy, so they must understand it (Lipsky, 1980). This section evidence how people make sense of the policy in practice, individually and collectively. Although there is no standard agreed definition of social value, participants recognise the need to be articulate and describe it before measuring it.

How the concept is understood often has a subjective and descriptive nature, based on how the policy (SVA) exercises it. They are various parameters on which the concept of social value stands in the commissioning process. Certain common elements define boundaries, which define the scope of a commissioning process or activity embedding social value. The language used around social value brings nuances to its understanding and acts as a driver that guides the action to seek it.

Different ways of understanding

The following statements made by some of the organisations interviewed (infrastructure organisations, consultants, charity organisations from both phase I and II of the data collection) show a broad understanding of how social value is perceived.

A participant sees social value as having a holistic nature.

- 1) The '*holistic nature of social value*'. A judgement can be made at the individual organisation level in contractual funding relations or at the system level in the commissioning process.

At the organisational level, the judgement of the front-line commissioner is essential to deciding the best service provider for a contract and proposing it for funding. The commissioner is the judge of what makes a well-funded contract embedding social value. There are different categories of elements to think about; it is also valid at the system level.

–SVA opens a shift in terms of thinking about doing procurement differently. Social value mediates and balances various strategic priorities. It offers a change in judgement: efficient and effective contracting + simultaneously thinking about the direct beneficiaries + the overall community.

– How to bring more extensive community benefits.

– Improve and secure outcomes, not only at the individual level, such as people receiving a service or an organisation engaging in the process but also at a collective scale, with implications for the community overall, including the citizens, the supply chain and other third-party organisations.

At the system level, the front-line worker's judgement is influenced by a bottom-up approach, even though he has the final say. It portrays the various ways multiple actors interact in the governance of the commissioning process. The holistic view on social value is shaped by an informed understanding of the community needs and the supplier engagement in the process. This view embraces the perspective that the process is essential and social value is not just about an individual project to specific beneficiaries, but it also offers broader benefits. It might be about helping the local voluntary sector get involved in the supply chain of delivery and, thus, promoting greater cohesion in the community. The local collective choices and characteristics shape the decision.

Another participant, an experienced researcher on public services, said that social value could be seen as a

"[...] quantification of an outcome or outcomes that are beneficial to society in some way." (IP12, Senior Researcher in public services)

Another voice, a consultant on policy and engagement in the local contracting authorities and with several years of experience in the charity sector, claimed that social value is about

“[...] the additional social, economic and environmental benefit to be created through the delivery of the service. [...] is what addition is made in terms of benefits in the way how you deliver the service.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

Similarly, a commissioner in a local contracting authority working on a commissioned project embedding social value to young people’s services noted that social value is

“an added benefit [...] so what is the advantage of buying this product from you? What other? Are there any other additional benefits over and above to deliver this specification?” (IP8 (CC1) (Commissioner in a local authority)

A procurement manager in a local contracting authority pointed out the same idea of community benefits.

“[...] how we procure goods and services in consideration for benefitting the local community. So, we are not just buying something because it is the best value for money [...] we are also now buying something that helps benefit the local community.” (IP15, Procurement Manager)

The same participant pointed out that it was about buying services that improved people’s lives.

“the way how the public pound gets spent has a positive impact on everybody regarding improving lives [...].” (IP1, Director of a social enterprise)

Thus, a general understanding is that social value is about outcomes and strengthening these outcomes is beneficial to society in some way. In this sense, the most common understanding of social value is that it brings something more than the overall contract value, so it is something additional in terms of benefits to contract delivery. An element that often appears in the interpretation is the added value over and above the contract commissioned. The target beneficiaries are not just the direct customers of the services, but they include a wide array of recipients included in the communities. Among these beneficiaries, the supply service organisations that deliver the service should be included. They should help by being contracted and by delivering a project where social value is a concern. It remains an open question how a contracted organisation benefits by delivering a project embedding social value according to local contracting authority regulations. VSOs deliver social value through their mission, but they do have their ways of working. Case study C in this research revealed some of the elements involved in their work and how they carry out their duty concerning social value. The front-line workers highlighted technical issues and a lack of resources in performing their duties to monitor and account for social value.

Ways of use of social value in decision-making – judgement

At the level of decision-making in a commissioning process, from a local contracting authority perspective, some judgements and choices need to be made when awarding contracts embedding social value.

From the data, it appears that social value is about the results that influence the lives of the beneficiaries and community overall, and it is about measurement. Talking about social value without showing it does not make sense. Evaluating it is problematic because of its subjective nature and the invisible touch that puts a print on people's lives. On both sides of the coin, the demand and supply side needs to find a suitable way to prove it.

A manager with experience in the charity sector commented that

“[...] the problem is that everyone interprets it differently; that is the problem...it is subjective [...] because the measure you can use to determine social value is also subjective as well. [...] but a lot of the social value comes from bringing forward, making a difference to life and things like that. Moreover, how do you measure that [...]?” (IP1, Director of a social enterprise)

At the procurement stage, the social value is a parameter against which the commissioner decides whether to award a contract or not. Thus, the front-line workers need to assess service providers in terms of organisational effectiveness to deliver social value and making a difference to the service. A manager with experience in the charity sector argued for the need for thinking in terms of return. It is about making a difference in the life of the beneficiaries.

“[It] is really about what is the return. If I give you one pound, what do you give me back? What do you do to make a difference? Moreover, do I spend money in the right way [...] (making a difference to life)?” (IP1, Director of a social enterprise)

Also, the *How* question is essential: *“How does the council think over the question of its expenditure, or is it genuinely able to commission with the money it has?”* (IP6, Executive Director of Social Enterprise) (Ex-chief executive/Senior officer of a local authority)

The *How* question is directly linked to the approach of cost savings or value for money, but it should also persuade commissioners to think about what is special about this provider and the value that it can bring to the service

A consultant expert on social value measurement and use of SROI in the charity sector pointed out that social value is about an organisation's total value.

"[...] I would define social value as the total value of an organisation or its activities in society as a whole, and that includes the environment and potentially future generations as well. [...] So, social value is a total... all-encompassing approach to assessing value." (IP3, Consultant)

A director of a social enterprise that operated a think tank assisting public services and the actors involved in it argued that social value was stewardship in the management of the financial resources seeking to get the best from public spending:

"[...] for me, again, it's back to the general principle of how the council thinks, over the question of its expenditure, or is it genuinely able to commission with the money it has, and can it make sure that the money does not just benefit the direct recipients of it, you know, the clients or the citizens but, more generally, the communities that support individuals to thrive and be independent as well." (IP6, Executive Director Social Enterprise (Ex-chief executive/Senior officer))

The same participant pointed out that social value was about giving something back to the community, achieving public good and having a positive impact. It somehow resembled the idea of public value.

"I thought what they (local authorities) were trying to achieve was to ensure that the way the public pound gets spent has a positive impact on everybody regarding improving lives. [...] but this was about to make sure that, the money we had, genuinely was bringing public good [...]". (IP6, Executive Director of a social enterprise (Ex-chief executive/Senior officer))

A procurement manager in a local contracting authority added a valuable point concerning the transition or the shift that the decision-making process leads on in the commissioning of contracts. It reaffirms the attempt to shift from the traditional focus on valuing the price of the contract to finding something of value to the community.

"[...] so, it is another element added onto our procurement processes which just allows us to give something back to the community rather than just procuring something that is the cheapest, and those sorts of things." (IP15, Procurement Manager)

A critical voice on how commissioning for social value is carried out, a researcher of public services, pointed out the need to use engagement mechanisms to understand what social value means.

“[...] it is important for the local authorities to consult other stakeholders when determining what social value (actually) is. [...] I think it is a very loose term. It is clearly not very well defined, and ultimately you can use it to mean everything you want. [...] it has to be a clear process, involving local authorities, commissioners, service users and the wide community to determine what they mean by social value.” (IP12, Senior Researcher in public services)

Thus, with social value onboard, at least at a theoretical level, the decision-making models of thinking used by the commissioning experts change how the judgements of evaluation on a contract are no more solely focused on economic value. The social value must be considered, not just a purely economic value. There must also be a recognition of the interdependence between the two.

To summarise, awarding a commissioning contract is a by-product of the intersection of the commissioners' high self-efficacy levels and a new model of thinking. Both are mediated through a change in the way of working and doing things. The intersection of these elements might lead to risk and creativity in the approach, rather than the more traditional pathways of commissioner practices in awarding contracts based on the low delivery price.

The empirical data bring some tensions in terms of perspectives concerning understanding what social value means. This tension arises from a policy that is overall vague and which does not specify to the people working on the ground with social value what it is or how they should apply it. Therefore, different localities use social value differently, and they have different challenges when using it.

The central aspect is the problems associated with the concept of social value. There is consensus regarding the subjectivity of the concept and the difficulty in defining it. The idea itself is built upon subjective components, and that contributes to the challenge of measuring it. The findings illustrate the interviewees' divergence in explaining the term of social value. While some of the participants recognised that defining it poses problems, one other pointed out that it might be present in everything and mean anything.

These problems affect the practice of commissioning contracts embedded with social value. First, the commissioners tend to differentiate what social value means in the commissioning or service itself. Working with the word is either an enthusiastic target or something to be avoided. It might happen because the concept has become a kind of buzzword that can mean anything and is challenging to measure.

There is a gap, and there is a need to balance the demand and supply sides. It is related to the coherence of the interpretation of the policy. There is limited information on what the commissioners want and how the service providers can improve social value in services.

The problem of understanding and implementing social value becomes even more complicated regarding avoidance when done in isolation, i.e., based on a commissioner's sole decision and understanding.

A point that is raised in the data is about a shared understanding of social value. There is encouragement for, and the perception that commissioning should increasingly embrace the engagement mechanisms with the suppliers and community. Such an approach could bring insights that may have an indirect impact on the local social value agenda.

4.3.2 Theme 4 – Understanding social value and its requirement for interaction.

This section further emphasises how the local front-line workers give meaning to and interpret the SVA and social value in various ways. Some of those meanings, among others, take an approach that opens up the debate to engagement and interactions with the supply chain. Some of the data highlights the importance of working with citizens, the supply chain, negotiating the meaning of social value, and giving a sense to it through varied mechanisms of interactions. All these relate to the idea of innovatively enabling a good commissioning process, where citizens and their needs are at the centre of the decision-making (Dickinson, 2015; NEF, 2014). The analysis in this section combines the views from different experts at both the national and local levels on what happens at the local authority levels in terms of local front-line working with the social value.

According to an expert local contracting authority officer, an interpretation of working with social value is seen through a policy lens. In a recognised case of best practice, it is stated that social value is about working with the supply chain and delivering sustainable work. It also raises the importance of hearing the collective voice from the supply chain and contractors and the funders' relationships with the local community. In terms of shaping or setting the parameters of social value operationalisation for individual services, this requires the involvement of stakeholders, the people affected by the service. The importance of allowing the voice of the people experiencing the service directly to be expressed is emphasised.

Concerning this, a researcher working on public services commented that

“[...] I don't think it should be up to council officers or commissioners to determine what social value is, or the politicians, I think it should be a deliberative process that is done in partnership with communities. So, I think if you wanted to take this agenda seriously ... you have to define social value. There has to be a shared understanding

and a shared approach, and then, finally, I think it has to be a coordinated effort; it isn't just a responsibility of individual services or commissioners; it is the responsibility of an entire city, an entire place, not just the council but also other public sector, businesses and also the TSOs. So, it has to be coordinated.” (IP12, Senior Researcher in public services)

A senior strategy officer working with the procurement teams and supply chain in a local contracting authority noted about working with social value:

“It is about how you actually, from the start, design it in a way to maximise that benefit, so it is the benefit that opportunity creates. I think what's important is defining what you mean for a specific thing that you are doing. So, like what we are trying to do with X. The social value there is pretty much about our supply chain, our contractors and the relationships of our contractors with the local communities. It needs to be defined in that way. So, I do think it is very important to define it with the audiences you work with to make it very clear what you mean in that specific instance that you are trying to do something because otherwise, it is very confusing.” (IP19, Strategy Officer for a VSO supply chain in a local authority)

There is the recognition that social value is linked to the supply chain providers and their contribution to it. Therefore, its definition shall be set in interaction with the providers to understand services' expectations clearly.

Also, the same participant said

“For me is about how do you work with your contractors to design services and get goods and deliver works in a way that is sustainable and that takes account and creates more positive additional benefits over the community.” (IP19, Strategy Officer for a VSO supply chain in a local authority)

Looking into case A, the efforts at the stage of starting a process of change, embedding social value, the role of the citizens, and their participation at the centre and putting a social value policy in place are highlighted. Although the strategic objectives are a working process at all levels, the data collected from participants show a need to communicate the social value policy aims as per the borough targets. However, such a step has to be achieved and visibly publicised.

“[...] the social value that the council determines has to marry up with what the borough priorities are. [...]I am not sure the council is communicating its social value objectives in the same way it has its borough targets. I do not see the correlation. I never saw the policy. If I put in Google the [local contracting authority] social value policy,

will something come up? I am not sure it would. I never heard talk about the social value policy. It is six years on.” (CA11(VSO), Manager)

Another critical dimension concerns setting social value meaning for services and how to implement it. The data highlight the importance of doing things that embeds and develops social value throughout the commissioning process, starting in the early stages.

The following quote highlights social value as an approach, a process, a method or a strategy. To a certain extent, these findings show an emerging need to understand social value as a process that requires a collective voice and a shared understanding, changing the way to approach social value policy into a core function to commissioning and procurement practices.

“[...] is a method; it is about the method and is the methodology for understanding what the best and most effective process or a way of delivering or achieving an outcome is. It is not just about the outcome itself; those things are important, and those priorities are important. But, the social value, like the Act, sees it, and how I have always seen it, is the additional (on top of) benefit that you get from something, because otherwise, it is tautological [...].”
(IP14, Director of a charity)

“Social value [...] is a method, [...] that is the best and most effective process or a way of delivering or achieving an outcome” (IP14, Director of a charity)

“[...] it is about how we procure goods and services in consideration for benefitting the local community. So we are not just buying something because it is the best value for money or it is the highest quality; we are also now buying something that helps benefit the local community. It could be in terms of jobs, training or housing...”
(IP15, Procurement Manager)

“It is about better understanding and managing the way that we are creating changes in our communities and benefitting other people.” (IP7, Consultant for a social enterprise)

It draws our attention to the implicit dimension of social value that the experts working within the commissioning process often recognise. It is illustrated in the quote below from one of the commissioning experts in case study B, highlighting the working language used with social value policy and its requirements. Social value is not explicitly articulated in terms of itself in using everyday vocabulary.

“[...] it is not very well-articulated and understood, or no, it is deeply understood, but it is not articulated in terms of the social value. That is not the language that the people talk. But it is how people feel and think; they do feel

that part of the benefit of voluntary organisations and the local contracting authority is better to have a value bigger than just yourself.” (CB10(LA), Senior Officer)

“[...] We did not ask people what the social value was, we asked people - what is the difference that needs to happen and makes it happen and what is needed within the borough [...]? And we come out with a concept that has more to do with the local (social) value, as part of the outcomes framework.” (CB10(LA), Senior Officer)

Some local authorities recognise the need to help people understand that social value is part of the process. An implicit working approach embeds social value, which is not articulated explicitly within the process.

“We are talking about social value, but again, there is a difference with the people who get it and understand the business. It is business as usual, and they will see within the borough that there is a [case study B local contracting authority] plan, which is the highest level of outcomes or priorities for the borough. And, you know, people see built into that there is a social value, and that it sort of cascades down into more specific strategies and values and, again, is probably there, but maybe not having been articulated like that. It is a bit like equalities and others; what you are working towards is mainstream, so you don’t have to particularly point out social value because it is done in that way. And for some people, you know, you’ve reached that point, and with others you know, you still have to work at it, to understand that social value is part of the process.” (CB8(LA)) (VSO Strategy Manager)

4.3.3 Theme 5 – Approaches to implementation

This section highlights the implementation dynamics in framing social value in terms of decision-making and approaches to implementation. It focuses on the operational levels, meaning how the front-line workers decide and approach the SVA.

Social value is core for the implementation of the policy, and the implementation is targeted at fulfilling the policy goals. It is recognised, as already mentioned, that the policy requires a new set of practices to be internalised in the commissioning process.

The local front-line workers must understand their specific tasks and responsibilities in translating the policy into their work. Beliefs in social value differ depending on the organisation and its expectations. The thinking of organisations on how to use the policy in their daily work is also dependent on their expectations, often driven by political considerations, in the commissioning and procurement process. In the same organisation,

as in a local contracting authority, depending on the department and sector service, various commissioners think about and approach social value with diverse goals in mind, with some even choosing to ignore it.

Commissioning field practice involves a contractual relationship. The embedding of the social value element in the contract is in the power of the local contracting authority. That the local contracting authority takes up the policy is crucial. The language used and expectations in terms of social value shape the service design in the tendering process. Often, the tendering processes refer to the policy's existence and ask service providers to evidence social value. The limited language expressing social value in the service design leaves room for service organisations to create space for innovation in how they articulate and evidence it as a funding opportunity.

In the commissioning process, the implementation dynamics of social value happen at multiple levels and involve multiple actors. The governance of a procurement process for winning a service provision contract brings the interactions of different actors competing for the same service into the same room. The commissioning for social value might occur in various ways.

In the governance of the process, the front-line workers work in the complexity of multilevel frameworks. The organisational actors working in the competing commissioning frameworks are nested together by similar organisational interests and purposes. The way the local contracting authority shapes the policy resonates down to the lower levels of service providers and, eventually, the target populations receiving the services (Sandfort and Moulton, 2015, p. 45).

The implementation can be seen as part of a multilevel framework at both the organisational and system level. This study clarifies the data at these general levels as it shows the scale at which the framing of action to implement social value happens. One limitation is that it is restrictive to some isolated levels, and in practice, there might be other approaches and overlapping that might occur.

The local contracting authority institutions may work at the organisational or system level. Based on such an approach, this study classifies the data at varying levels, in between the different interactions and dynamics of implementation.

There are two main approaches to framing actions and making sense of social value in the contractual relationships of a commissioning field. The approaches involve i) the procurement stage, where the focus is on an organisational-led undertaking framing social value, and ii) the full commissioning process-focused system-led undertakings related to social value.

Changing the decision-making process and results that create social value

The front-line workers in the local contracting authorities need to think about the expected results with SVA implementation in their local services. As mentioned, there is not one defining comprehensive element of social value. The concept of social value is hard to define, so it might be challenging to decide on what it is in practice. The decision-making on contracting services depends mainly on the front-line workers' authority to decide and act on it. Deciding what creates social value might be an individual's decision (e.g., a commissioner), or it could happen based on an analysis and understanding of the expectations of the people delivering (service organisations) and people affected by the service.

As noted, there is no definition of social value, and each area service and front-line workers might have their understanding and interpretation of it. So, because the policy is not sanctionable, each front-line commissioner might use it as they consider fit. Decision-making might depend on various personal or organisational set procedures but could also be context-service-specific.

At the local contracting authorities' level, the approaches to social value might be different at different levels. The decisions of the front-line workers should focus on the best contract choice that brings social value to the beneficiaries and community overall. At the procurement stage of a contract, judgement is needed when choosing the best provider that brings social value to the service. At the procurement stage of the service, the service organisation brings their view concerning the implementation style of social value through the service delivery.

On a final note, as mentioned in the earlier section, the SVA policy objectives aim to change the commissioning practice and to enact change in a context where the local contracting authority commissioning practices approach broadly focuses on price and accountability in results. For example, an interviewee (commissioner in the local contracting authority) commented:

“Where the social value kicks in, where it happens, is that, when we are commissioning the service, we will make a judgement whether there is a social value element to be delivered by the service. Moreover, we decide if there is a case, or should social value happen or should not; everything should have a social value attached to it unless we can demonstrate why it should not have [...]” (IP8 (CC1), (Commissioner of a local authority)

The objectives aim to create a shift in thinking and strategic approach in the commissioning and procurement process. The drive is to make the best use of the resources and the providers' ability to bring social value to

the service delivery. From the following statement of a consultant in a social enterprise, the intentions of the policy become more explicit concerning the supply chain.

“Our view was [...] if you take not just the cost but the total benefit that a charity, voluntary organisation or social enterprises can bring into the delivery of the contract; they will beat the private company because the private company might be able to compete on price, but the way they are going to deliver something is not going to be as beneficial as the way a charity, voluntary and social enterprises organisations will deliver it. So, the idea was to try to kick the playing field more towards quality than the price. But, because of austerity, the focus has been on price, and we do not tend to win on that.” (IP 14, Director of a charity)

Approach one – procurement stage – the organisational-led approach to social value

The focus is on contractual relationships at the procurement stage. In the tendering process, the local front-line workers award the contracts of social value. They are the ones who should make the judgement at the procurement point on the value brought by a specific organisation to the service beneficiaries and beyond (i.e., making on organisational-led undertakings with social value).

At the procurement stage, the organisation’s ability to articulate social value is essential. Managerial skills and ability play an essential role in developing the competitive status of the proposals to tender. So far, the practice shows that the local authority institutional, organizational logics of practice-led procurement require evidence of social value as an outcome for the service contract on the supply side. Regarding the demand side, in this context, the local contracting authority commissioners and procurement teams there is under pressure to find ways to account for social value and make it measurable. However, although various methodologies are emerging, the field is still at its initial stages due to the limitations in capturing the intangible aspects of social value.

The practice shows that, so far, much thought has been given to social value as an outcome created by an organisation’s operational activity, and it can be presented as evidence to show accountability for results and implicitly secure more funding. Such an approach values the operational outcomes of the individual organisations and embodies the subjective components of (social) value brought about by the organisational activity.

As has been mentioned, the discretionary approach of the commissioners might enable or not the consideration of social value criteria within the contracts of commissioning. The findings show that a large part of the thinking and consideration of social value occurs at the procurement stage. Usually, as per the policy requirements, the social value criteria might be set during the tender application as part of the contract, within the weighting of a certain percentage.

Lack of developed framework and adaptation

Various critical voices are in place in developing adaptive frameworks to guide the process of procuring service contracts.

At the point of procurement, the design of the service specification is set by commissioners on broad terms, introducing the existence of the SVA requirements and addressing questions on social value to the supply chains competing for the service delivery. An assessment of the supply chain providers' proposals brings evidence on how each provider has articulated, operationalised, and evidenced the social value for a particular service and what they can bring as part of the contract. At this stage, the commissioners recognise that both voluntary and private organizations' supply chains' understanding and articulation of social value might vary.

In the following paragraphs, the modes of thinking and means of approaching the commissioning of social value in the process related to the supply chain will be described.

As mentioned earlier, the commissioning environment is built on a rigid system of regulations to foster transparency, openness, and competition and limit large contracts with specific thresholds, as per the EU procurement requirements. Within this landscape, the profit and voluntary organisations are under strict criteria, including their operational effectiveness in delivering social value.

The formulation of social value at the procurement point is defined, created, delivered and evidenced by the service organisations answering to the tender and competing for a contract. Interpreting and evidencing social value is required on the supply side of the service organisations, leading to the individual articulation of it in the tender proposal. On the demand side of the service, the local contracting authority's role is to find and acquire services embedded with social value.

A strategy manager for the voluntary and community sector in a local contracting authority commented that

“[...] at the end of the day, is down to the individuals how they interpret that (social value).” (CB8(LA)) (VSO Strategy Manager)

A commissioner working in a local contracting authority and engaged in a social inclusion project for young people pointed out that:

“We ask the provider to demonstrate to us what social value is in their service provision. [...] I found that it can be quite helpful because most providers have a better idea of what they can bring to the service, into the social value, than we might have. Moreover, what we might have specified would be quite limited.” (IP8 (CC1)) (Commissioner in a local authority)

Also, from the same commissioner’s perspective, the same line of reasoning argued that:

“[...] It is always the organisation that is bidding to deliver the services and demonstrate that they can deliver the services and meet the specification of those services. Moreover, that includes the services with a social value attached to it and their reasonable prices. [...]” (IP8 (CC1)) (Commissioner in a local authority)

Similarly, another argument from the data highlights a higher expectation of the service organisations to come with their social value offer.

A policymaker working with VSOs said that:

“[...] they (commissioners) will say: tell me how you do social value, it is not this is what social value is for us – it is, you tell me what it is – and obviously that encourages the business to say, well, the social value is what we do, you know, and that creates the system. [...] And then the commissioner ends up looking at it – oh, that sounds nice, I will have that - but do you need that? [...] I see a lot of irrational decisions where it goes – you did not know what you wanted, and you just took whatever they gave you and said - oh, that is what we wanted.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

A critical voice of a participant noted how some commissioners did not understand what they wanted in terms of social value,

“[...] but the problem is the commissioners have no understanding of what they want to achieve. Or, if they do understand what they are trying to achieve, they are not too confident in that, so they let the service provider shape it for them because they do not have something which they feel confident with.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

Thus, due to the difficulty of understanding the social value, the relationships in the procurement process can be an essential factor in determining a specific understanding and evidencing of social value in particular services. An example of this is corporates dominating the market with their CSR programme interests. In this sense, a critical interviewee, a manager in policy who experienced the local contracting authority commissioning process, stated that, in such frameworks,

“[...] the relationships are (totally) demand-led rather than supply-led. Sorry, I said in the long run. So, the local contracting authority has a demand which is supplied by corporations, and those corporations are [...] saying, we will do CSR for you. And that is CSR defined by them not defined by us [...].” (CA6 (LA), Manager)

This statement highlights important implementation dynamics regarding the agenda of social value that dominates in the commissioning process. It is known that contracts for social value should respect specific thresholds. It often makes the bidding process favour the large companies bidding for contracts with the local authority. Usually, the big corporates come into the framework with their understanding of social value, which relies heavily on their corporate social responsibility's programmes. So, the market is shaped by corporate interests and agendas. They are the ones that decide what is meaningful in their service operation, evidence it by using meaningful standards (e.g., SROI) and creating a compelling application story for the council.

Also, the assessment of suppliers bidding should be based on *how* questions, which can delve deep into the operational activities of the service organisations that deliver social value and restrict the award of contracts based on other premises. A policymaker expert puts the focus on *how* questions in decision-making when awarding a contract.

“Ok, but how you can improve, what is the next step, what's special, by the way. How you do it [...] what is special about you [...] that is what's special about charities, it's the how [...], and this is what social value is supposed to be about; it is the how.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

The operationalisation of social value in contracts is related to what is easy to measure. The local authorities borrow ideas from others and adapt them to their local context, usually focusing on the general dimensions that could boost the local economy. As a commissioner in a local contracted authority stated:

“[...] So, one of the things that we might ask for are jobs for local people, to boost the local economy so forth and the employment market, so there is a clear element of social value regarding social context.” (IP8 (CC1), Commissioner of a local authority)

A critical participant, a lead manager of a CVS in a local contracting authority, stated that social value might be understood through outcomes that are repetitive and often applied in the contracts:

“[...], if you go for social value on everything you may be in a position where you end up having silly outcomes like training apprentices that you do not need just to meet the social value requirement of the council on the council contract, and that has happened.” (CB4(VSO), Executive Director CVS)

From case study A, which covered the initial stage of developing a social value policy for commissioning practices, it can be seen that, until now, the idea of social value has often been applied and mixed with Section 106 agreements in planning.

“Typically, if we are giving a contract to a developer [...] our attempt at social value is to say to the developer: when you develop, we will like you to hire four apprentices from our local college, and that is your input back into our community, our society. And for me, I don’t think that is the right paradigm for social value, which for me feels more like corporate social responsibility. [...] So, for me, social value has been mixed, in the world of the local authorities, social value has been mixed with corporate social responsibility.” (CA6 (LA), Manager)

Approach two – the system level (collective participative relationship) in the commissioning process

This approach brings to the fore the dimension of interaction in the commissioning process.

A critical voice, a strategy manager for voluntary and community services in a local authority, highlighted the need for the local contracting authority to take action on their own before reaching the procurement point of the service. An approach to engagement might be beneficial for both the demand and supply sides. That step might help the VSOs understand the local contracting authority requirements and support them in articulating their social value. It can be a process with various benefits, including support for and capacity-building in these organisations.

“[...]. I think what we need to do is explain to the sector what social value means so that they recognise what they are doing, which is like social value. And I think if we get that across, the organisations will find it much easier to articulate it (unclear) and then provide the support.” (CB8(LA), VSO Strategy Manager)

A critical voice, a policymaker with experience in the voluntary sector, stated that it was about the commissioner's understanding or commitment to stewarding the resources. An important aspect was also about nurturing the relationships with the supply chain providers and investing in those organisations they wanted in the local area.

“ . . . we talk about market stewardships, you know, what they should be doing is stewarding their resources. So, what they should be doing they should be looking at all their providers and making sure there is a balance and taking their views on board, but that also means them growing and nurturing the kind of organisations they want in their local area. If you want those organisations which boost jobs, volunteering, help with social integration etc., you have to grow this kind of organisation, not just say I want something [...]” (IP14, Director of a charity)

This approach raises the debate concerning using engagement mechanisms to make more informed decisions regarding outcomes and designing the services. A collective perspective guides the decisions of the front-line workers in the area of commissioning services. This approach embodies the governance of an entire commissioning process to social value service planning and delivery: i.e., collective-led undertakings on outcomes and social value. A consultant working on policy and engagement in a local contract authority and with significant experience in the charity sector pointed out that:

“[social value] is a method [...]. Social value is about [...] process.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

At this level, the social value is linked to the governance of the commissioning process and methodologies that enable social value creation. It unlocks, in the debate, the relational dimension of the commissioning process and the process interactions of the institutions within the field. At the operational governance level, the whole commissioning process tasks - planning, design, and delivery of services - bring an engagement element to the shaping and delivering local social value. Seeing it as a methodological approach implies a method of strategic thinking, an innovative way of thinking and understanding that allows effective strategic planning on making the best of the resources at hand and the assets of the community and supply chain, and also brings additional value. The commissioner's position is that of a strategic commissioner that needs to think and plan for social value to be meaningfully delivered. The findings establish the basis for exploring social value within the commissioning process from a methodological perspective.

As has been stated, the approaches vary and are influenced by an institutional logic of the local context. There is an increased awareness that aligning social value to the local needs and priorities is essential, and the means to reach such an aim are through engagement at varying levels. However, there are several fragmented

responses to the SVA in focusing on a citizen-centred service and relational approach' in service design and delivery. The following paragraphs map the various implementation activities of engagement with target groups in the commissioning cycle and highlight gaps in the practice.

Activity one – No participation in the procurement stage/no consideration of the whole commissioning process

The data show that the experts (the commissioners and procurement teams) often decide the needs and priorities regarding an individual service. The decision-making and power when setting the service design rely on their expertise.

At this stage, depending on the service area, the front-line workers may or may not refer to the SVA. They may choose not to consider social value if they think that an individual service does not have its element. If social value criteria are considered, the front-line workers may set those criteria and score them according to their understanding. A weak understanding of social value often attracts a low score, among the other rationales that might be present. Any follow-up and assessment of social value may or may not happen during the lifecycle of the contract.

- Decision-making about needs and service design – entirely controlled by commissioners/no insights from the market into the service design.
- There is no public participation or the supply chain, and the decision is in the experts' hands.
- The SVA statement and a social value question embedded in the application are at the commissioner's discretion.

Activity two – Consultation and engagement to set an element of social value to service design

The policy specifies the consideration to use engagement mechanisms in the commissioning process. Such a mechanism might involve a sense of compliance to do a consultation with the service organisation. It often happens that commissioners engage in consultations on individual service. For example, in study C, the commissioner consulted with stakeholders to get insights into the service design. It happened before the tendering process of the contract.

Another might be a range of tools of engagement that the front-line worker might use, which are used on a case-by-case basis. In study A, the commissioner consulted with young people to understand their needs and led focus groups. It depends on the organization's interest and willingness to nourish the relationships with the direct beneficiaries and other stakeholders affected by the service delivery.

However, the power to decide what goes into a service design still lies with the commissioners. Their insights may contribute to the service design specifications. The commissioners tend to leave the section on social value open, as the policy might. A commissioner explained that such an approach was because it encouraged innovation among service organisations. Sometimes, the consultation stage is performed as part of the tendering process as a formality to show clarity in the process.

While talking about the process, the commissioner in case study C explained that when a service embeds social value, the criteria of social value in the project and its scoring are specified. However, when consultations occur, it might just be mentioned that the service is required to show social value without going into detail about it. The meetings often focus on the technical and procedural details of the tender rather than discussing what social value criteria and details are to be met in the service.

For a service that is contracted to last over several years, it is essential to have periodic consultations to discuss how to improve it. The local authority publishes the call for a consultation and usually meets with a cluster of organisations linked to the local authority database. Also, as case study C shows, sometimes, the procurement is contested because of the feedback received. In such a case, the process must be revisited and changes made. That leads to technical delays in tendering, and at such a point in time, consultations cannot be held for that service.

- The only service focuses on the customers receiving the service (e.g., directly or to families in a social inclusion project for young people).
- The customers of service are important actors, providing information on their satisfaction with the service.
- Despite consultation with the public or the supply chain, the commissioner is still in complete control of the decision-making. Some insights could or could not inform and change the service design.
- The SVA statement and a social value question embedded in the application are at the commissioner's discretion.

4.4 Findings 3 – Manufacturing social value in the commissioning process

This section elaborates on the relationships between the local contracting authorities and VSOs in the commissioning process. It focuses on the approaches taken by the actors to enable a process of engagement that creates social value. One of the critical elements of tension in the commissioning process is to what extent the commissioner develops the relationship with the service organisations at the pre-commissioning stage.

4.4.1 Theme 6 – The need for engagement to enable an informed social value agenda

The data show that the history of the local contracting authority in the UK is a technocratic one. The local contracting authorities are corporatist organisations that are particularly good at delivering services and are adept at doing things professionally and through a bureaucratic approach. However, there is tension as there is a disconnect between the local authorities, senior officers, and communities.

So, an important aspect is understanding the work that has to be done. An understanding of the local needs and expectations is essential before placing a bid:

“what do you value, what is important locally? [...] you should be asking people bidding for services to focus on that, how they can generate more value in achieving your local objectives or your government objectives through that. [...]” (IP14, Director of a charity)

A crucial element to achieving this is, notably, engagement. The most critical element for the fulfilment of commissioning tasks and creating value in the commissioning of services is engagement. It might be an essential driver of the agenda, as the stakeholder’s engagement is a necessity.

“[...] we wanted commissioners to then do the engagement because then you can engage about something and rather than you say – what do you think about delivering services for [...]?, it would be you - I want to deliver services of[...] in this area, what is the best way of doing that. We want to create value for the community through these mechanisms [...]” (IP14, Director of a charity)

Thus, the policy is intended to increase interaction in commissioning through engagement mechanisms and dig into aspects meaningful to the community. The policy is intended to encourage the embracing of these engagement mechanisms and understanding what is valuable.

Engagement is an essential enabler in learning about the market and healthy relationships; it does so by ensuring the views of service are balanced. According to a policymaker working in the charity sector, this could impact the quality of the service delivery. He commented that:

“[...] if you do not invest in engagement and understanding communities, you are going to have bad service at the end of it. [...] what they (commissioners) should be doing is stewarding their resources. [...] looking at all the providers, making sure there is a balance and taking their views [...] it also means them growing and nurturing the kind of organisations they want [...]” (IP14, Director of a charity)

However, the commissioning process is technocratic and rigid, so there is often a lack of opportunity to express a voice. The approach is focused on tokenism.

A professional researcher on public services commented that:

“The local contracting authorities are not good at doing that [engaging with people]; they are good at delivering services, you know, to serve a certain standard. But I think some VSOs are especially good at that community engagement, especially smaller organisations.” (IP12, Senior Researcher in public services)

The same participant argued that:

“[...] the extent to which the local contracting authority could argue it has an understanding of the social value that local people share is questionable. Whereas I think VSOs are much more connected to people and have much greater, much deeper networks into neighbourhoods, within communities, you know, among different groups and society [...].” (IP12, Senior Researcher in public services)

He also pointed out that it should not be up to council officers or commissioners to determine social value or politicians. It should be a deliberate process done in partnership with communities; there must be a shared understanding and approach. The VSOs do an excellent job at engaging and communicating with local people, and they have a deeper understanding of their needs and aspirations. At the same time, the way commissioners tend to evaluate and understand the social need is relatively narrow.

This recognition comes across in the data from the statements of a front-line commissioner evaluating the proposal of social value at the procurement stage, as mentioned earlier. There is a recognition that the supplier needs to demonstrate social value as what commissioners specify in the service design is often quite limited.

One participant pointed out the critical role that VSOs can play by helping the local contracting authority understand the community needs.

“To get an understanding of that [social value], you have to talk to people differently, and I think the voluntary organisations are better at doing that. They have more expertise and knowledge of the type of techniques and methods and tools they need, but you need to do that. So, I think they can play a crucial role in helping the council to identify needs and expectations in a better way.” (IP12, Senior Researcher in public services)

An expert policymaker with experience in VSOs recognised the need to get quality in the commissioning process by investing in the understanding of the community. Investing in engagement and how the engagement is done can create additional value in the process. That engagement allows for learning needs and priorities, thus helping commissioners understand their preferences and shape a conversation with the supply side on what has to be delivered. Such an approach might have positive implications on both the demand side (effective decision-making and use of resources) and the supply side (a boost to social inclusion). Without investing in engagement and understanding, community services might be inadequately delivered. He pointed out that

“[...] to get quality, you need to invest in the understanding of the local community, of the local area and its need. So, you need to do that bit. And then, how you do that can create additional value.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

The same participant highlighted its potential impact:

“[...] If you do engagement with VSOs, the community, and citizens, you may boost identity, help social integration, create happiness and well-being, mental health. Everything around that, empowerment, all the things around this that we know are really important.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

There is a need for relationships that include information on the social value needs, highlighted one local commissioner. At the tender, the commissioners understand what needs to be addressed by the supplier organisation.

“[...] the local authorities who are representatives of the borough, the community, the people should define what social value means and have relationships with the local businesses and agencies who want to work with us and

say – this is what we think will be the best use of that. You are going to do this development, but our social progress scorecards say that this area is really in need of a playground for children (as an example). So, what we would like you to do is, use your budget, whatever, or the community infrastructure to build a playground next to your flats. That, because we think that by doing so, that community and that new community we know that's got lots of children and a school there, they get value by using that playground, rather than you picking four students from our college to be in apprenticeships. So, we want to reflect that relationship.” (CA6(LA), Manager)

Using the engagement has key-driven institutional logic for the commissioners, with an instrumental purpose at the end, and creates social value. A participant, policymaker, highlighted:

“[...] absolutely, there is a kind of narrow commercial reason for doing it. Because if you want good service, you need to engage. [...] if you want to procure and use your money effectively, you need to know what your priorities are, but there is a social value element to that so that you can apply social value to the process of social value.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

The same participant argued that there were tensions over how the engagement process had been carried out to date in various forms without meaningful results at the end of it. The importance of understanding the terms and processes entailed to them was recognised. The data show that the government should invest a lot in engaging and understanding communities because that is the most effective way to understand what services they need to provide. However, the local authority needs to understand their local priorities. A fundamental understanding of definitions by the front-line workers shapes the nature of local interactions. If that is missing, the result is a very weak engagement.

“And the problem is, [...] a lot of the engagement exercise is because you do not know what your priorities are, it became meaningless. [...] You are talking about engagement, you are talking about getting co-production, [...] and (actually) you do not know very much in terms of what that means.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

It is a critical aspect that raises problems, especially for VSOs engaged in front-line work with limited time and resources. A policymaker with experience in VSOs made a significant point:

“When councils and government procure services, they assume that everyone will give their engagement for free. So, they would expect the VSOs to come in and tell them everything that is happening locally, how they should deliver a service, what kinds of the best way to do it are, and they will not be reimbursed for that. They will not be reimbursed for that at that time, and neither will be reimbursed by that if they were to bid for the contract successfully.” (IP14, Director of a charity)

4.4.2 Theme 7 – Planning and designing services at the pre-commissioning stage.

The data show that along with the SVA, the legislator encouraged local commissioners to consider the duty of consultation set out in Section 1 and Subsection 7 of the Act. The 2015 regulations (Regulation 40) make it explicit that potential suppliers (like VSOs) may be included in pre-procurement market consultations. Therefore, while considering how the proposed service might improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area concerned, the public commissioners might find it helpful to consult while shaping the service specifications.

The specifications stress that the nature of engagement intersects with the decision-making process of the front lines. It can be a means of shaping what is considered to be appropriate social value for services before procurement.

Doing consultation is not a fundamental shift that alters the nature of the front-line work of the local contracting authorities. However, applying it in the commissioning process appears risky for some front-line workers, especially as it involves supplier organisations designing services. Different local contracting authorities' realities show different ways of working, some being more traditionally top-down in their approach, where the experts decide how to embed social value. In contrast, others are open to more interactive methods. Some local experiences are more innovative than others when considering the co-design of services, depending on how risk-averse the commissioners are. Decisions about the implementation task are fragmented. The findings show that the design of service specifications at the pre-commissioning stage is patchy. The technique used most is consultation. Some commissioners tend to be more risk-averse. It can impede the setting of social value appropriate to the service, as might happen if the deciding process is done individually by a commissioner or a supplier. These tensions have been outlined earlier in this paper.

The front-line workers might negotiate the decisions about these activities. However, some commissioners prefer a traditional working relationship. For some, adopting a flexible, interactive environment might go against competitive tendering. Alternatively, some local commissioners see their position as experts at setting service specifications and do not need to consult the potential service suppliers before the procurement.

“So, once you have done your needs assessment and have done your priorities, so you are going to say what services do we think we need to meet those needs? That will often be a co-design process. However, councils can be very

suspicious in involving existing providers because they think they might give them an advantage in involving them in designing the next stage, [...] the council then might find ways to exclude you. Because it will say, you have inside information.” (IP6, Executive Director of a social enterprise (ex-chief executive/senior officer)

A consultant to the voluntary sector and strategy officer to the local authority stressed that

“when you start the procurement process, you cannot talk to people, in a human way, (...) there are many important rules that sometimes can be a barrier. If someone has a question, it has to go through the proper channel; you know, everyone has to receive a response. However, sometimes that goes too far in the procurement teams, being too paranoid about talking to potential providers and market. [...] And I think that can pose problems with co-design elements.” (IP13(CB1) Senior Strategy Officer (charities))

There are suspicions about people who are already providers, and there could be tension when they are doing an evaluation related to performance and impacts.

An ex-commissioner in a local contracting authority and currently working in a think tank social enterprise commented, based on his work experience, that

“[...] B [local contracting authority] could be quite old fashioned and can be very municipal, leaving the feeling that he knows best and, therefore, to all intents and purposes, the commission is just for its prospective. While, S (another local contracting authority) had plain commitments to involving citizens in shaping what needed to be commissioned and potentially being part of the solution as well, so being part of the delivery solutions. [...] (...) you cannot commission anything if you do not understand what the market needs.” (IP6, Executive Director of a social enterprise (ex-chief executive/senior officer)

The same participant highlighted that the VSOs are often suppliers of services rather than organisations that inform decision-making. The relationships between the local contracting authorities and VSOs are primarily hierarchical.

“[...] I think that, often, VCSE gets seen as a potential provider and does not get involved, at the formative stage, in thinking exactly what it is you want to change for the better. [...] there are still kind of quite hierarchical relationships between the council and the VCSE sector, seeing them as the end solution to delivery rather than helping with design services upfront.” (IP6, Executive Director of a social enterprise (ex-chief executive/senior officer)

He also pointed that the formative stage of commissioning, where there should be a strategic needs assessment and prioritisation - is the stage where the VSOs are not very involved. This stage tends to be managed by the local contracting authorities' front line, which keeps control of the process, as they are considered to have the required expertise in strategic needs analysis. Thus, it is a stage that is often controlled by local authorities' experts and political agenda priorities.

“[...] Local authorities will tend to run that part (unclear) and very often will be the public health functions of local authorities that will take control of that process as well, genuinely, because they have the experience and the expertise in sort of strategic needs analysis. So, quite often, it feels to me that it is a fairly prescriptive process that's owned by councils [...]. And the politicians, of course, will make decisions about what are considered to be the priorities anyway. So, it is always that there are added complexities that, however good a needs analysis you do, there will be political decisions taken about it, which can cut across any consultation or engagement you might have done.” (IP6, Executive Director of a social enterprise (ex-chief executive/senior officer)

The data collected reveal that the decision-making process always lies with the local contracting authority. The political agenda priorities are often the ones that decide what outcomes are essential. Also, in councils where more innovative practices have been embraced, the final decision-making on the agenda is done at the political level.

“I think, when money is involved, councils want to keep control of the performance frameworks, even if the providers might have better ways of measuring impact.” (IP6, Executive Director of a social enterprise (ex-chief executive/senior officer)

4.4.3 Theme 8 – Creating social value through co-production

This section draws on evidence gathered from a local contracting authority (case study B). This case data shows that undertaking a locally based engagement approach is not smooth and can involve many complexities. Also, it depends on many critical factors at various levels to make it happen: investment in engagement, time, skills to work with the market, and citizens.

As has been seen, creating social value through the process of carrying out the activities might make a change in the commissioning process. At the core of such a process is an emphasis on the citizen-centred approach.

Knowledge of the needs of citizens and their voice shapes the appropriate design of services and their delivery. Although implicit in the process, the participation mechanisms used by the local contracting authority in the market might create space for, or hinder, the interaction and learning of the community needs. It emphasises the importance of interaction when creating an informed decision-making process for setting the outcomes frameworks and social value criteria for the services. Learning what social value means should derive from a deliberative process through engagement with the communities and suppliers, which will deliver the services and empower them to have a voice shaping the needs and priorities.

Underlying the tensions in adopting a co-production approach, a senior consultant officer on strategy, policy and performance in the local contracting authority pointed out that

“Co-production has to have value, I think, and there are some things that I noticed from the commissioning side that have been problematic when trying to do co-production, happening when it undermines the experience of the commissioners. That is typical because, and co-production should not be like that, going out and talking to people, more like outside and just doing what they say, it should be a backward and forwards process [...].” (IP13(CB1) Senior Strategy Officer (charities))

A strategy manager for the voluntary and community sector in the local contracting authority highlighted that

“[...] the whole point of co-production and design is that it grounds out the elements of social value in whatever it is we are trying to design. So, yes, it is a tackled part of it. Ok, whether it is articulated as social value or is the social value expressed in different ways. It would be extremely odd if a co-production process did not have at its core the idea of creating social value and drawing social value.” (CB8(LA), VSO Strategy Manager)

The commissioners are also looking to get the outcomes clear and co-producing the outcomes framework with the VSOs. A context of understanding each other's work requires time to set up. It requires giving the organisations enough time to work beforehand to either sort everything out or focus on things they can do and make a difference, rather than something they think they should not be doing. From the VSOs' perspective, the need for money to do that is fundamentally critical.

The conversation on both sides can be challenging, and sometimes it can get tricky.

“When you bring those two people together, then you got a real chance to have a conversation. It takes humility on both sides, which is tricky, [...] especially when money is involved, [...]. So, it takes time to develop those kinds of things and takes humility from commissioners to say - Maybe I do not know everything, can you tell me? And

it takes humility from the VSOs to forget that-[...] 20 years they have been fighting for money-[...]and that local contracting authority was not giving them money.” (IP13(CB1) Senior Strategy Officer (charities))

The natural temptation from the commissioners is that they try to make it a fixed thing because it is a lot less work and a lot less of a problem. The attraction from the commissioner side is always to fix something, then say: We’ve got this. We’re doing this. This is our framework. And you fit into it. Nevertheless, co-production is different in different areas; it is not a fixed procedure.

A consultant who worked on the strategy for voluntary and community services in local contracting stressed the essential tensions in the working relationships because co-production is entirely new to the commissioners and suppliers’ organisations. It requires time to develop these relationships. As they might feel unprepared for such a strategy, bringing them together in workshops might be helpful, but it could be challenging because of the egos involved.

“... so I went back to separate workshops again because it takes time, for people to understand, on both sides. And over a period of time, we managed to bring the process together. So, the next step is to bring together individual discussions within each stand and theme that we developed. But it is tricky; people need to step up.” (IP13(CB1) Senior Strategy Officer (charities))

Case study B shows the council commissioning team changing their strategies towards a more open and supportive approach with the supply chain to respond to the adverse impact on the VSOs.

The team adopted a hybrid model supporting a more flexible environment for commissioning services. The politicians and commissioners had suffered some loss of image over the years, so they recently turned back to the VSOs. They experimented with a different approach to connect directly with the VSOs and understand the sector and community needs. They took an approach that invests in policy and the capacity-building of those organisations and seeks to understand the local needs. It is more a service organization and citizen-centred based approach to change how the service delivery is achieved. Competition is still the main market criterion of the commissioning and procurement process. However, the core change is the attention given to the entire commissioning process and the interaction with the service organisations and the public. Such an approach is more focused on the social value created through the process. It sustains engagement with VSOs to shape the services procured and do better in the bidding. If they are at the margins of the market and no one gives them attention, they will either disappear or find alternative funding models to survive.

Sharing power in the commissioning process

In commissioning co-production, the power dynamics of the traditional investor-investee relationships are challenged. This approach requires a change in funding culture and a transfer of responsibilities. Despite this shift, the final decision-making power and control over how the services are designed and delivered stays with the local contracting authority commissioners. The local contracting authority has the power to provide information and interaction mechanisms. In local authority decision-making, power covers the possibility of deciding what kind of and whose information is essential. The decision-making can happen just at the procurement point when evaluating the winning proposal for social value. Alternatively, in the governance of the commissioning process, for instance, in co-designing service specifications, the front-line workers can decide on the insights received and how to shape the design of the service.

The aims of the commissioning agenda are often politically driven, and they reflect the local contracting authority's political priorities. An important strategic issue that drives this agenda concerns local issues, including deep social complexities and trust and public action legitimacy problems.

Case study B shows how the commissioners grew their awareness of the importance of changing their way of doing things. They acknowledged the need to share some of their power and adopt a more flexible approach by using mechanisms such as co-design to learn and acquire some of that knowledge needed to deliver services appropriately to the local citizens. A front-line commissioner with several years of experience in the local commissioning process and involved in the co-production commissioning argued that the management of the process was critical, as was collectively working out the aims of the process.

“... asking and using that intelligence to inform what we decide on, so the essential thing is how to manage that process in the wider context. People do not just start to shout about the thing they are most interested in, and they will come together, and work out aims collectively.” (CB9(LA), Commissioner of a local authority)

The same participant recognized the value of informed decision-making by working with the VSOs to co-design the services that can reach people who may be under-represented or have been overlooked (VCSE Sector, 2016). He acknowledged the importance of the voice and knowledge of those organisations and realised it was essential to use that local organizations' intelligence.

“... asking and using that intelligence (of VSOs) to inform what we decide on [...]” (CB9(LA), Commissioner of a local authority)

The local intelligence makes them unique because delivering complex social services would be challenging without them. Designing outcomes together is a mechanism that is often used, although the quality of the interaction in doing this varies. Several mechanisms are in place to inform or design outcomes for services, including consultation and service specification co-design.

The previous participant acknowledged that, in the current context, the use of the voluntary sector organisations to deliver services was crucial. The evidence shows the efforts of the commissioners to improve the local governance of the public services and the relationships in the commissioning process. These include improving the local public policies and the relationships with the supply chain. It did by enacting various policies to regulate the relationships and a policy related to local social value. By doing this, attention has been paid to the local VSOs, including the small and medium voluntary sector organisations. The overall process influences the broader development of the sector. Attention is paid to it, showing that it gives voice to the sector to express its needs and to develop its capacity and face, in the long run, the pressure coming from contracting for services during austerity.

Past local contracting authority governance issues drove the procurement process's need to change, among others. Thus, the local authority changed, embracing co-production to realise its policy and service provision aims. Such an approach added some responsibilities from the sector related to designing outcomes services. Also, a feeling of ownership of the agenda was engendered.

Here, the benefits of working with the local communities were apparent in the past. However, their taking on of co-production policy had only recently been formalised. There was a recognition that using this kind of process had induced a power shift. Now, rather than local commissioners telling people what to do, the approach became: How we can work together?

“(...). So, the power shifts. It is very much about power balance. [...] So, it is sort of like empowerment, but very much placing it into the community and voluntary sector organisations rather than the power. It is very much about shifting power. So, before that, it was, we are the commissioners, and we tell you what to do, whereas now is - How we can work together? [...]” (CB6(LA), Procurement Manager)

There is recognition that the VSOs understood those efforts. However, they also understood that they were coming together to work for collective goals, not individual, organizational purposes.

In a different conversation, the commissioner working on the co-production policy and commissioning co-design projects with the VSOs pointed out that:

“[...] I think lots of people did understand that because the council offered to share that power. By getting people involved at the design stage, it is essential to understand, it is vital for them not to (just to) talk about the things that were purely the best for their organisation. But they came together, and they worked for the borough as a whole. So, I think that they appreciate when the power shares as much power as possible with them, they respond, so they must respond by being responsible and talking about the greater good of people rather than their organisations. [...] But it was good for the borough as a whole. So, it has been very successful.” (CB9(LA), Commissioner of a local authority)

In these contexts, the commissioner described the VSOs as professional amateurs. Despite this, the commissioner appreciated the work value that the VSOs were bringing to the local community. However, the word *amateur* might not be taken well by some VSOs, who consider themselves experts in a specific service area.

For the VSOs, the information was also influential as it allowed them to understand how they could influence delivering social value. Having the proper information allowed them to use the opportunity to participate or not in the commissioning process. In study A, the service organisations reported a lack of information. There was a lack of communication between parties regarding the social value policy and how the local contracting authority implemented it. In the case of study C, the tender application only briefly mentioned a social value policy and the scoring of social value applied to the project (5%). After various meetings for this research with a commissioner in a local contracting authority, a behaviour change occurred; the commissioner took the initiative to publish some policy links on what social value meant. It seems he had realised the importance of giving more information to potential service organizations bidding for services.

According to the participants, at the pre-procurement stage and through co-design, a shared understanding and design of outcomes clarify how to define service designs and achieve social value. The understanding of social value emerged as an essential aspect of policy implementation.

5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the framework of collaborative social value creation based on the main concepts drawn from the exploration of the SAF theory. It is based on the analysis in this study of the working relationships between the local contracting authorities and VSOs in the commissioning process. The chapter comprises several sections. The first section presents an overview of the main framework of discussion (Section 5.1). The following section presents an understanding of the commissioning process, the actors playing in the field and the conditions that prevail. These conditions enable or not a collaborative working relationship (Section 5.2). Then, it unpacks the commissioning field in terms of social mechanisms shaping the relationships (Section 5.3), the social skills of the actors needed to make sense of the policy and enable its implementation by operating a contentious vs a collaborative approach to embedding social value in the commissioning process. (Section 5.4). The final section focuses on the practices of commissioning for social value and its implementation.

5.1.1 An analytical frame: a collective/contentious social value framing and its implementation

The analytical frame builds on some primary elements of the SAF theory. It provides an explorative framework regarding applying the theory's features in the commissioning process for social value.

In the SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, 2012), the focus is on the actors' actions related to public service interventions and results. This study unpacks the dynamics of the field to understand the actors' actions to achieve the policy goals. The focus is on various components, such as practices, interactions, social skills (framing and collective strategic action) and outcomes. In exploring the actions, social skills are critical when considering how the actors execute them. In this way, we examine how individuals might undertake decision-making to achieve the desired goals (Hallahan, 1999).

Some specific theory elements underpin the parameters of analysis.

The level of the analysis

For this study, it is helpful to think that the policy system of implementation in the commissioning of the public service involves various institutions, individual agencies (i.e., behaviours and interactions) and rules that govern the interactions within the formal and informal fields. Regulations shape the policy, and the operationalisation of strategies occurs through organisations, each with its systems and dynamics. Different interactions come into focus at different policy levels. The change is brought about by the skilled actors who operate at these levels. Moreover, the targets of the policies experience them through the front lines of the system, which can make or break the intended outcomes.

This study looks at the implementation activities unfold at the front-line organisational levels, where different strategic actions occur and are accompanied by various challenges. According to Moulton and Sandfort (2017, p. 162), the front-line workers are the “interfaces that directly interact with the target population to carry out the program”, and their “individual agency affects implementation results”.

The commissioning process is a field where strategic actions occur at different levels. The commissioners in the local contracting authorities are the front-line workers using the SVA policy in the commissioning process. They have a certain degree of autonomy and discretion attached to their understanding and interpretation of the policy and its implementation in practice.

The commissioning field for public service provision is a complex system, as is the implementation process.

Commissioning for public service brings to the fore the democratic aspect of public service: its nature of being in service to the public (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017; Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000), and of it setting a design of services that reflects the public needs. The commissioning for public service, in broad terms, can be seen as a means of social intervention, which, according to Moulton and Sandfort (2017), is an intervention that aims to benefit the public. So, in terms of this study, the commissioner’s role is to frame a specific action that will fulfil the public needs while achieving the policy goals.

The SVA policy could be seen as a social mechanism that shapes the commissioning practice and gives meaning to the actors’ actions. SVA influences the field and, implicitly, the actor’s interests in the field. The front-line workers in the local contracting authorities are one of the leading implementors of policies at the local level. The way they understand how to exercise control and shape the interactions, along with the policies, influences the dynamics of the field. Therefore, the policy is seen as a social norm, “institutionally sanctioned that gives structure to meanings and relationships” within the commissioning field and that

“govern agents’ behaviour and offers rewards within it, and frames the rules of participation in complex interventions” (May 2013, p. 6). Within commissioning, actors act on the policy and implement it based on the rules and their understanding of it.

The implementation process is about change (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017, p. 146), and, in a field, it gets a nuanced conceptualisation, depending on the numerous parameters influencing the implementation. Some argue that the implementation should be understood as an ensemble of complex processes and coordination methods: a continuous and interactive accomplishment rather than an outcome (May 2013, p. 1; Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). It is essential to note the changing nature of policy implementation because of its reinterpretation from the national to the local level (Butler and Allen, 2008, p. 422). The latter authors also point out that each local organisation uniquely mixes elements of national policy with their requirements, so the implementation becomes unpredictable and its compliance with national policy sketchier. The policy domain, such as the social services, and the policy implementation in this field are not characterised by routine logic with fixed boundaries. However, they are dependent on the attributes of the individuals or communities they target (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017).

Action within the field - incumbents and challengers

For the scope of this study, the commissioning process for social value is a field, using the SAF (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011) as an insightful theory to understand the actors’ positions and social relations in the market. As a SAF, the commissioning process is a field where different institutional activities interact. The field’s rules are based on various policy regulations, including competition and fairness, among others. The field is unstable and competitive rather than inclined to be cooperative. The commissioning of public services includes different actors, both private and working for VSOs. These diverse organisational identities distinguish themselves in terms of their mission and characteristics (Moore, 2000). The actors in this field are interested in winning and competing for funding resources from the local authorities. Each actor should follow the local authorities’ policy and service contract requirements to play according to the rules. So, there are different overlapping fields in the process, each with its priorities (governmental, voluntary sector, corporate, and community).

In the field of commissioning for social value, the organisational identities come forward in the tendering field with their organisational agendas to deliver social value and win contracts. The commissioners need to evaluate the different social value interventions and decide which organisational identity is fit for delivering

that service. To genuinely decide which organisation is the most appropriate, the commissioner should understand what they are looking for in terms of outcomes and social value for that service.

Social skills actors

A new shared sense of power relations emerges when a field is unstable under crisis conditions (such as austerity and budget cuts in service allocation) (Bozic et al., 2019, p. 60). An essential mechanism that is a vital component in how the policy is delivered is social skills. The people (skilful individuals) who interpret the rules and mobilise the resources to carry out the policy are critical (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017). The field easily is dominated by the incumbent's strategic interests and actions. These actions can either be authoritative or interventions that are action-oriented, building interactions and understanding with other actors as a means of shaping the field.

This aspect of social skills highlights the actors' ability to:

- “induce cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 46);
- “contribute to the emergence, maintenance, and transformation of social orders” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 50) and “use [of] knowledge about field dynamics to influence others to either reproduce the current order or change” (Moulton and Sandfort, 2017, p. 147);
- “use skills and tactics (framing, brokering) that they believe appropriate in context and that shape the social dynamics (either of coercion, competition or cooperation)” to reach their goal (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Moulton and Sandfort, 2017).

Hallahan (1999, p. 215), citing the work of Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth (1998) on goal framing, argues that “positive action (goal) framing, involves focusing attention on obtaining a positive consequence (gain)”. It is pertinent in commissioning, considering the SVA is an effort at the national level to promote social value. However, our focus is at the bottom level, looking into the effort and actions related to the front-line workers' decision-making when shaping their decision by incorporating social value into their practices. The actors make choices on implementing social value based on a) how the policy frames the action around it and the opportunities that are unlocked at the local level, but also b) how other local experiences frame the action by embedding social value in the commissioning process and the outcomes around it.

In this regard, this study outlines a conceptual framework for social (value) co-construction (framing and implementation), focusing on social skills framing collective action that includes various actors in the commissioning for social value.

Laamanen and Skålen (2015) developed a framework based on the SAF theory to elaborate a framework of collective-contentious value co-creation in which actors, interactions, practices, and outcomes are the critical interrelating components. They argue that SAF theory divides actors into incumbents and challengers based on their positions of field dominance, thereby making collaboration and conflict between them a key to the analysis. In their view, the incumbents exercise disproportionate influence reflected in the dominant social order, while challengers have an alternative vision of the field. Due to their subordinate position, challengers often use extra-institutional means to challenge the power of the incumbents (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). The authors (Laamanen and Skålen, 2015) pointed out the “usefulness of perceiving collective value co-creation as a conflict between incumbents and challengers”, which this study chooses to consider. In their view, also, “the persistent conflict between challengers and incumbents explains the agency”.

State actors commonly regulate the functioning of market actors and increasingly govern everyday acts and practices of consumption in efforts to safeguard the consumer (Laamanen and Skålen, 2015). The local authorities, playing the role of incumbents, act to protect the social order of the field that defends their dominant position. At the same time, challengers act to improve their position in the field by trying to influence that order. SAF theory acknowledges that the relationship between the actors may look quite different, depending on the organisation of the field in question. “Withholding, withdrawing, or turning resources to work against field convention represents collective–conflictual practices”, according to Laamanen and Skålen (2015).

In commissioning service provision, the interaction between the supply and demand side of the services has changed. The power relations shape the interactions, and whoever has more power can shape the field of service delivery. In this field, often the funder, because it holds the money, tends to direct the interactions during the contract delivery and checks the service goals achievements. The interaction is subject to legal and contractual obligations. The financial resource dependence is a variable that attracts supplier organisations like VSOs into this field. The funding of a service contract could mean an essential source of revenue for the survival of a small-medium VSO.

Thus, the financial resource dependence and their position in the market, from the start, put VSOs in a contra-balanced power situation against the funder and other competitors. The VSOs resource dependence plays a

vital role in shaping their interactions with the funders, such as the local contracting authorities. There is recognition of the contentious funding landscape that does not focus on a collaborative approach. The tools used, like contracts and the transition from grants to contracts has increased barriers, or contentious dimensions, to supplier organisations like VSOs. Often these organisations direct themselves to other funding sources or alternative means of delivering the services. However, the larger VSOs that often attend competitive tenders consider implementing social value criteria in the contract. They have found a way to stay in the market.

The approach to entering into a contractual field of relationships assigns the providers' responsibility to fulfil the contract's obligations. The actors who are motivated and interested in the financial resources of the local authorities undertake the path, although they are aware of the challenges of the system. The contracting field encourages a process of homogenisation towards a set of common interests as the local contracting authority sets the rules, and the suppliers (competitors) seek to ensure that they can provide the requirements, including the social value criteria. The field itself is challenging to enter, and it is a kind of isomorphic institutional process that has aims, among others, to target the increase of internal organisational efficiency and also the creation of a sort of similarity among the organisations engaged in the field (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) to some degree. The current model to encourage pluralism and diversification is stringent. The commissioning models should consider their impact on the structure of the organisational field. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) believe that attending to both similarity and variation might bring gains.

This study puts the discordant relationship between incumbents and challengers central to the analysis of the field of commissioning for social value. According to Laamanen and Skåén (2015, p.386), SAF environments are contexts embedded with collective action involving organisations, sectors, networks, systems, markets, or societies. In their view, due to the plurality of the practitioners, it is often challenging to connect collective action practices and outcomes. They cite Snow and Soule (2010), who claim that collective action in social movements is characterised by outcomes with intended–unintended and internal-external consequences, and they consider this division applicable to SAF. The intended–unintended dichotomy corresponds to a positive-negative outcome trajectory. A positive response from an authority, opponent or audience translates into an intended external outcome. Most of the goals set by groups engaging in collective action are aimed towards externally intended consequences (resource-supplying relationships based on competition) (Laamanen and Skåén, 2015, p. 388).

Ultimately, SAF actors in general, and challengers in particular, rarely reach and satisfy their goals in totality (McAdam and Scott, 2005). Due to the dynamics of strategic collective action and the temporalities of this

action, the collective goals become “transformed as they are translated, and today’s ‘victories’ give rise (...) to new reform efforts” (McAdam and Scott, 2005, p. 40, cited in Laamanen & Skålen, 2015). It is called the paradox of conflictual–collective action. Collective action begets counteraction. More fundamentally, the collective is made obsolete by reaching its goals while failing to satisfy its constituents. Thus, the conflict is perpetual.

Fligstein and McAdam (2012, p. 30) argue, “if a field is an arena in which individuals, groups, or organisations face off to capture some gain, then the underlying logic of fields is not encoded in the structure of the network but the cultural conceptions of power, privilege, resources, rules, and so on that shape action within the strategic action field”.

According to Laamanen and Skålen (2015, p. 392), stability is an interim stage in a continuous cycle of relational friction caused by the power differences between the incumbents and challengers. Their conceptualisation conceives inherent problems with the harmonious views of value co-creation interactions, practices, and resulting outcomes. Their proposed collective–conflictual perspective points us towards contentious collective value co-creation practices. By introducing incumbents and challengers and the conflict between them as key to value co-creation, SAF theory supplies added opportunities to define and analyse the value co-creation practices. Such a definition of practice rests firmly on the understanding of collective actors challenging (or defending) some form of institutionalised power and authority through contentious strategies and tactics to reset the field on a more equitable basis.

The idea of collective action is people’s actions to enhance their status and achieve some common objective. Laamanen and Skålen (2015) state that the theories of collective action are relevant for understanding collective efforts and the often-uneasy relationships between the beneficiaries of a service, the providers, and their context in various markets relationships.

The following table (Table 5.1) outlines the critical components of the SAF theory, which helps shape the conceptual and analytical framework of the study. It points out the essential elements for the commissioning process and the dynamics of the field in this context. In this conceptual framework, several parameters are outlined bordering the field of commissioning. It introduces the critical elements to the framework of analysis of the field of the commissioning process. It lets us visualise the main aspects under discussion and the links between them in the commissioning process. This model creates a new framework of interconnected elements. It is built on inquiry and invites learning about existing conditions within the field (along with SAF

theory) which influence the implementation process, and “considers the nature of implementation challenges one might face” (Sandfort and Moulton, 2015, p. 20) when interacting and applying a policy.

First and foremost, the SVA policy shapes the commissioning field as a social mechanism regulating the actors’ interaction. SVA policy is the first significant mechanism that shapes field formation. It introduces the concept of social value in the field of contracting funding relationships. Also, it emphasises a new innovative way of thinking on finding a balance between the contracted services’ economic, social, and environmental outcomes. The policy can enable new activities and practices to create innovative collective action and bring stability in the commissioning field.

The commissioning field in which the enactment of the policy happens is relatively unstable. Various contextual external drivers (external shocks) can influence how the SVA policy can impact the field. The actors are under various external pressures, like a complex service provision with increasing social-economic needs and limited budgets to address it, which determine the actors to respond to the policy in a certain way.

Also, the changes in funding towards the voluntary sector supply chain, from grants to contracting culture, created a contentious impact on this sector.

Secondly, the contracting funding relationship is traditionally a technocratic system of relationships.

The field of procurement and commissioning brings a dynamic field of interactions with actors with competing interests and agendas. The actors might play various roles between incumbents and challengers. These roles are determined by the power they have in controlling and shaping the field to their interests. There is an interactive institutional framework among actors, with challengers (agents with fewer privileges, less influence over the rules, and receive a smaller share of SAF benefits) vs incumbents (agents that use the power within the field) and their models of social movements. The incumbent role is controlling and persuasive authority in the field, with its private interest in attaining the policy objectives. Some street-level bureaucrats need to award outcome-based contracts that embed social value and conduct its implementation. Their decision-making on the contracts must impact the overall community, in other words, achieve social value. The other actors in the field play a challenger’s role in contrast to the incumbent (who has the financial resources and the power over decisions and setting the targeted outcomes). Thus, the role of the different actors in the field might be more influential (incumbent) or less (challenger).

To some extent, roles might increase their influence in the commissioning process, depending on how the incumbents understand and deliver the policy objectives/goals. For example, large corporates influence

commissioning for social value, conflating their CSR programmes with the social value agenda. Another example is the larger charity providers that become more competitive and can win commissioning for social value projects compared to small-medium voluntary sector providers. The small-medium providers are marginalised on the edges of the field due to the competition. Thus, the policy structure of the contracts (e.g. large budget contracts) with the social value does not allow them to access this market.

Thirdly, an essential component for this study is the social skills that empower the actors towards a new shared sense of governing of power relations in the commissioning field. It is an essential component in how the policy is delivered. The commissioners' in the field are the ones who decide and interpret the rules and mobilise resources. Their actions can be contentious or collaborative in their approach, oriented in building interactions and understanding with the other actors to achieve the commissioning field policy goals. The social skills ability of the actors might induce cooperation and help create shared meanings around the SVA in the policy and collective identities. They can create change by using various tactics, like framing, interpreting, brokering and bridging, and shaping the commissioning field's social order to reach their goals through cooperation rather than competition and coercion. Local contracting authorities have the power to enact innovative collective action.

A fourth essential aspect in the commissioning field is the interactions and power dynamics. It outlines the degree of perceived influence that actors exercises in the field and the differences between actors in exercising the strategic interests in shaping the field. It outlines the potentially contentious issues between the incumbents (the local contracting authority) and challengers (voluntary sector organizations). "These practices are connected to some essential resource and grounded in a shared understanding—an ideological justification frame of a value regime—that entices collective action" (Laamanen and Skålen, 2015). Domination as practice takes place in a cycle of contentious action, counteraction and compromise, where settlements reconfigure power relationships in the field.

Table 5.1 SAF components - Commissioning for social value creation model (CSVCM)

Key concepts	Component	Examples of variation
<i>Scale of analysis</i>		
	Social mechanisms	Legislation as social mechanisms Social appropriation and innovative collective action
	Stability and contention drivers from external shocks	Degree of stability or instability; changes in funding, legislation, or field actors
<i>Incumbents vs Challengers</i>		
	Actors position & change	Change in target group behaviour; alterations in experiences, as well as the degree of change in their behaviour
<i>Social skills actors</i>		
	Skills to enable change	Use of tactics such as interpreting, framing, brokering, and bridging
		Collective collaborative-contentious practice Collective action
<i>Sources of authority / interactions</i>		
	Interactions	Degree of perceived influence of political authority, norms, beliefs, and values Power differences

Source: Moulton and Sandfort, 2017; Kauppinen et al. (2017); Laamanen and Skalen (2015); Fligstein and McAdam(2011) adapted for this study

5.2 Field of commissioning: actors positioning and starting conditions

Based on the insights of the various theoretical frameworks, the following framework tries to operationalise the commissioning process field in implementing the SVA.

5.2.1 The starting conditions matter

The starting conditions of the commissioning field (environment) is crucial and, in combination with other factors, influences the desired outcomes (e.g., policy or programme achievements). Commissioning is a managerial tool that embodies a contractual relationship. The commissioning process creates a relational field involving different relationships with various actors' interests. The actors are united in their shared goals, which shape the aims of the commissioning field environment. Also, there is a connection between the factors that characterise the field within the context. They are interdependent and influence each other.

Each commissioning model approach may vary in space, time and the nature of its content, scope and sequence. In its nature, the commissioning field is volatile and heterogeneous. The field structure is fluid and does not have a fixed process or embedded mechanisms, nor is it the same for all types of organisations. The sequence of the commissioning tasks is also fluid, depending on the actors' interests, and often the process is a field bound within a service contractual funding relationship between its demand and supply side. It is an inter-organisational contractual form of working between a funder and a funded party. Also, working among the actors in the field is fluid and evolving during the contractual period. The organisational actors involved in the funding relationship are varied, each with its distinct purpose. There is an intersection of public, social and private interests within the process with mixed social and economic goals, leading to different forms of delivery of the policy aims and services. There is a range of power dynamics within the field, with the challengers and incumbents positioned in the market landscape, each of them with distinct organisational identities, values, and strategic purposes.

The field rules are often stable, and the actors understand their goals and the requirements of the contracting domain. Some weak actors in the field, such as small-medium VSO providers, may have difficulties overcoming the process's technicality. Therefore, the field has moments of conflict, as the actors are in competition and jockey for position (i.e., winning contracts of public services delivery).

Each field of the commissioning process is complex and has interconnected elements. Each field has its political and economic structures and social interactions. The field might need to adjust and evolve to respond to its subfields' new and emerging needs, namely organisations, users, and communities affected by the field.

The actors might exercise agency and power dynamics within the field and enable collective interactions to reach the policy aims. Enabling interaction requires particular social skills and framing of the action in a field, i.e., a new thinking perspective that enables the collective interaction to reach everyday purposes. The field

context is essential in the setting as it interplays with the actors' actions and the tools at their disposal needed to reach the policy aims. These factors may involve the political dimension, social and market demands, and other factors.

Context conditions the commissioning process field

Due to austerity, budgetary expenses for service delivery have fallen drastically. The commissioning contracts are aimed primarily at the least expensive cost of delivery of services, and such an approach favours the large organisations that can offer a lower price. Besides, the stringent regulations surrounding commissioning and how the commissioning process is conducted do not encourage small and medium-sized VSOs to engage in service delivery.

Exogenous shocks, such as the external European procurement regulations and directives for responsible social procurement, may lead to political realignments and shifts in the policy agenda (Pettinicchio, 2013, p. 84).

Although the SVA aims to create a more level playing field for VSOs in delivering public sector contracts, data shows some agents are more influential than others in winning the contracts. The commissioning field rules and the pressure of austerity have pushed commissioners to focus on large commissioning arrangements, embedding an element of social value within them. Such an approach is favourable to large organisations that can afford to support such a position in the market. An adverse effect of this is that some large private companies have won many public service delivery contractual arrangements and are now major outsourcing contractors of such delivery. Such an approach is also rooted in the commissioner's risk-averse behaviour, preferring to commission contracts with big organisations with a good contract delivery record and financial sustainability. Where the social value element in winning a contract lies, how relevant it is and what evidence it has been delivered is not always of importance as any follow-up is patchy.

In practice, data shows that any public, non-profit or profit organisation within a commissioning field is part of a framework of competition seeking to win contracts of service delivery, regardless of whether it embeds social value or not. However, there is a recognition that each kind of organisation can create social value differently, based on the scope of their mission and depth of their activities, their values and the objectives of their operational activities. The question that arises is: To what extent do the legal typologies in the decision-making matter? Commissioners recognise that if service delivery goes to a VSO, then the social value delivery

is part of their identity and work. For them, creating social value is a given as it supports their social mission and social aims. Also, in the bidding process, evidence from the commissioners' approach suggests that it is a given that VSOs will come with their interpretations and articulation of the social value embedded in what is delivered. There is such an expectation because that is how they operate. In a way, this helps the commissioner to understand better how to provide their services. However, there is a gap on the side of the VSOs when it comes to presenting a narrative of social value based on the work they are doing.

The commissioning process is fluid and often in transformation. There are distinct features that show how the commissioners approach the process and act upon it. There are also many challenges for the VSOs when looking to shape the commissioning market for social value due to the structural problems when applying for contracts (i.e., bureaucratic structures, time-consuming, no incentives, competitive environment, technical skills). There are complexities and different levels of action that need attention.

A vital facility is capacity building. It is needed on both sides. The commissioners need skills and an understanding of the social value and how to commission the appropriate services to address their needs. The VSOs need incentives and capacity building to bid for contracts and articulate their social value purposefully. The shocks and contentions in the field might drive those agents towards creating a new strategic field for social change, where their action drives on the collective attribution of threat/opportunity, social appropriation and innovative collective action (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 20–21) to address contention.

Environments for collective action are comprised of actors who are not necessarily participating but who, in some manner, impact the dynamics and course of action in the field (McAdam and Scott, 2005). Social systems change and avoid ossification through conflict and innovative collective action. Both are continuous, malleable, and constrained by social structures and resource inequalities.

5.2.2 Actors' position in the field

One relevant stream within the field is service systems representing the configuration of actors and resources in which value co-creation is embedded (Laamanen and Skåéen, 2015, p. 389).

Edvardsson et al. (2012), cited in Laamanen and Skåéen (2015), suggest that actors' practices in service systems are an effect of both social structures (e.g., power, norms, cognitive schemes) and their reflexive

agency. However, Laamanen and Skåén (2015, p. 389) point out that the abstract nature of this conceptualisation makes it hard for empirical research to analyse it. The same applies when analysing conflict–power issues, such as structures of domination.

Uniquely, SAF theory divides actors into incumbents and challengers based on their positions of field dominance, thereby making collaboration and conflict between them the key to the analysis (van Wijk et al., 2013). According to Fligstein and McAdam (2012), the incumbents exercise disproportionate influence considering the dominant social order of the field. On the other hand, challengers have an alternative vision of the field. Due to their subordinate position, challengers often use extra-institutional means to challenge the power of the incumbents.

While not using a SAF conceptualisation, recent studies point towards the usefulness of perceiving collective value co-creation as a conflict between incumbents and challengers (Laamanen and Skåén, 2015, p. 389).

Corvellec and Hultman (2014) focus on the politics of value in waste management. By drawing on Appadurai's notion regimes of value, they point to the discrepancy between various valuation frameworks in a given social setting. They show that actors within a social context, such as a service system, draw on various regimes of value as “expressed understandings of what matters as opposed to what does not” (Corvellec and Hultman, 2014, p. 5). Their study on how waste management service providers need to navigate various value propositions based on practical, political, economic, and environmental considerations of the actors could be reinterpreted as exhibiting conflict between the collective understandings of incumbents and challengers and their environments (Laamanen and Skåén, 2015, p. 389).

The persistent conflict between challengers and incumbents explains the agency. Incumbents, often supported by authorities, act to protect the social order of the field that defends their dominant position. Challengers are driven to improve their subjugated position in the field by replacing that order. Informed by SAF theory, value co-creation processes or parts of such processes emerge as a conflict between incumbents and challengers labouring to realise their respective interests. Thus, SAF theory provides an answer to why actors conduct value co-creation as they do (Laamanen and Skåén, 2015, p. 390).

The actors working within the field need to understand the sense of the policy ruling the area and translate it into practice. It is about understanding the field purposes, as that determines the action to be taken in implementing the policy. The field of commissioning does not lack complexities. The front-line workers' experience with the process reveals the practice's difficulty, highlighting its multi-faceted approach. The full commissioning process is rarely completed, and it is often conflated with procurement and delivery. Each

commissioner applies it in their way to reach the targets in the public service provision. Often the commissioning cycle is seen as an ideal, and the pre-commissioning is patchy. There is a recognition that commissioners should make the process more accessible by issuing more information and confirming the rules and norms governing the field, the timelines and other structural issues. The most relevant part of the commissioning process is the configuration of the actors in the system. Each organisational actor “enters its relationship with governmental authorities on its terms, with its expectations, its objectives, and its bottom line” (Salamon, 2001, p. 1671).

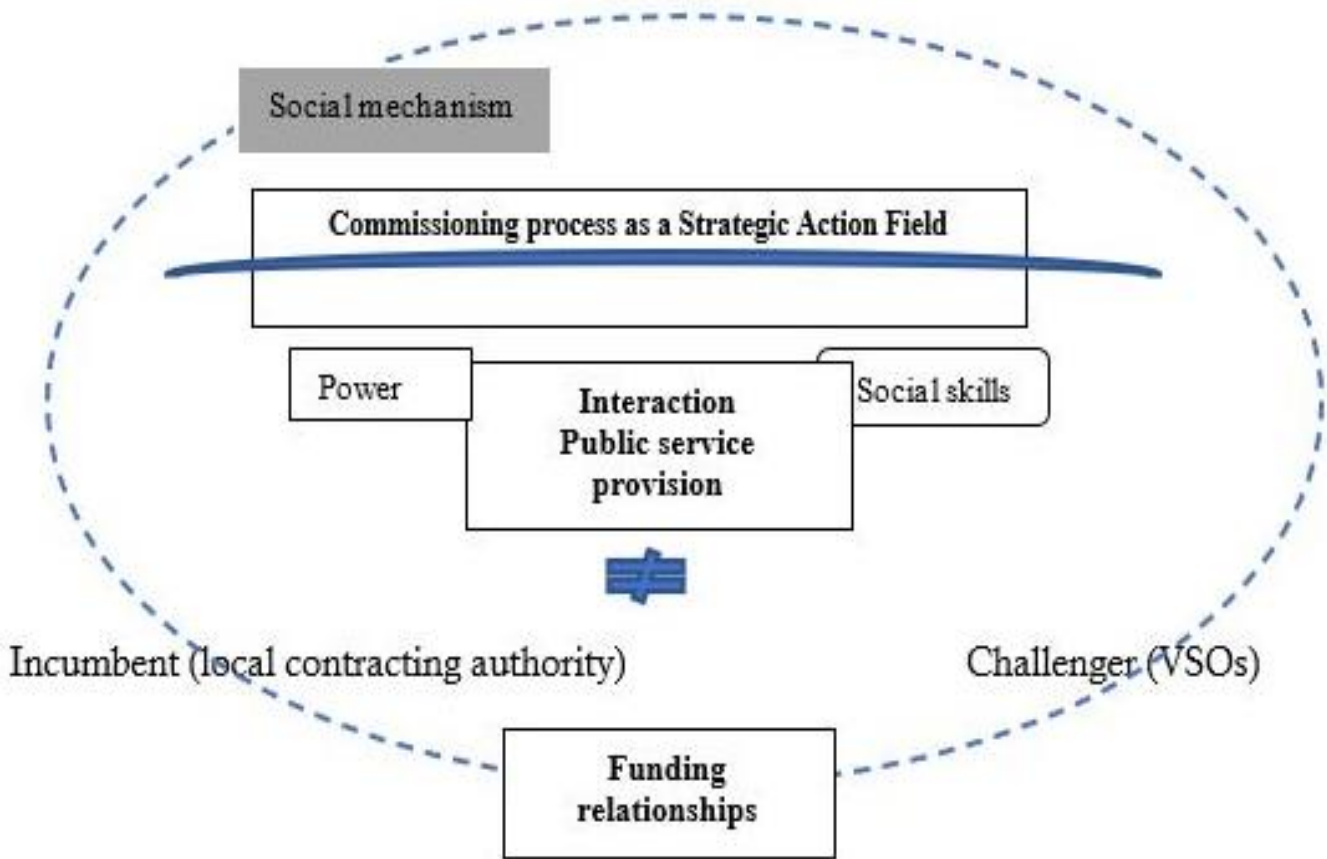
SAF divides players into incumbents and challengers based on their field dominance, thereby making collaboration and conflict the key to the analysis (Laamanen and Skålen, 2015, p. 389). The actor taking an incumbent role dominates the context. With their organisational identities, the actors are exercising agency based on their free will to be part of a highly competitive and technical market landscape. Key elements of the funding relationships are norms based on rewarding performance and outcome-focused field of work, promoting competition and choice over the best service offered. The commissioning field can be a point of conflict (i.e., competition for funding relationships) between the incumbent and challengers.

In the social system field, each actor draws on organisational identity, various values regimes, and multiple understandings on how to create value in their environments. In the public service delivery landscape, the supplying service organisations might engage with the commissioning field or might not as they might not be prepared. It depends on their rationales, one of their motivations being the resources dependency of the financing coming from the local contracting authority.

Within the commissioning field, inter-related policy actors pursue the public policy vital to them for instrumental reasons. The field of the commissioning process could be a point of conflict or could be “assimilated with the organisational level rather than an arena of conflict organised around specific stakes” (Fellows and Liu, 2017, p. 581). The authors, Fellows and Liu (2017, p. 584) also, highlight that “differences in objectives, perceptions and interpretations of meaning give rise to tensions between the actors and hence, potential conflicts”. In the public service commissioning, the dispute might revolve around the external shocks of austerity and budget cuts that may influence a new way of distributing contracts across the providers. That also affects how the structure of the interactions takes place in practice, although it can take the shape of innovative forms to address the complexity and challenges of the field. New modes of working may develop, based on negotiation and a shift in focus towards a more cross-sector joint working and integration (Field and Miller, 2017). However, it is not easy to mediate these relationships. Drivers like

austerity put pressure on commissioners to get things done with the least cost possible, and engagement takes time and resources.

Figure 5.1 Commissioning field- actors' positions



Source: own elaboration

The bellow figure (Figure 5.1) outlines the commissioning process and the actors' position within the field. The SVA is an instrument that shapes and regulates the actions in the field. The commissioning process is a field of service provision where actors interact, and their actions are shaped by the SVA policy (a social mechanism). The field of commissioning is a contractual funding relationship. It incorporates the position of the power between the incumbents (local contracting authorities) and challengers (voluntary sector organizations) in the commissioning and procurement (contracting) process. The incumbents have the power to shape the field as per their strategic interests. The social skills of the actors in the field can frame and align relationships towards shared understanding and interaction.

Organisational and structural tensions

The funding relationship is based on a fundamental accountability relationship between the local contracting authority commissioners/procurement teams' expectations when awarding a contract in service provision and the ability of the provider to deliver that contract. The contracts are shaped based on procedures stipulated in law and regulations. Control is needed over "the fulfilment of contractual terms in the procedural and technical aspects, and especially service quality" (Schmid, 2003, p. 314). Depending on the type of contract, the procedures to deliver a contract might differ. Providers must align with rules during the life span of a contract and fulfil the obligations required by it. The contractual relationships affect the organisational identity of the providers and their operating systems. Payment by result contracts is awarded on the criteria of meeting targets. It is about reaching outcomes while the organisations that fail to comply with the procedures and miss the targets are often "subject to sanctions that might influence the steady flow of resources needed for their survival" (Schmid, 2003, p. 314).

The legislation on social value has been an add on to the contract delivery. Adding social value criteria when awarding a contract requires understanding the social value operationalisation and evidence of how it is delivered during the contract from the providers. The voluntary sector providers have their ways of delivering social value. During the contract life span, expectations on how the social value element should be monitored and delivered can appear misplaced. There may be various reasons for this, including the commissioners' lack of knowledge of the service delivered. It might influence the way they see how a particular service might be delivered by embedding social value criteria into it because the contractual relationships limit the freedom of the provider to deliver the services, which, in turn, might influence the service delivery. The shift from the grants schemes to contractual relationships placed both the contracting authorities and providers in a more demanding and complex system of funding relationships. There was more freedom for the voluntary sector providers in service provision with the grants schemes. Those voluntary sector providers that work in the market under contractual obligations are mostly those organisational models which have financial sustainability to deliver large contracts. Indifferent to the type and size of the organisation, those in the market need to cope with the constraints directed by contract delivery regulations and thresholds.

The funding relationship is based on a fundamental relationship of accountability between the local contracting authority commissioners/procurement teams' expectations when awarding a contract in service provision and the ability of the provider to deliver that contract. The contracts are shaped based on procedures stipulated in law and regulations. It requires control over "the fulfilment of contractual terms in the procedural and technical aspects, especially service quality" (Schmid, 2003, p. 314).

Providers must align with the contract rules during the life span of a contract and fulfil their obligations. The contractual relationships might have different impacts on providers' organisational identity and their operating systems.

It might happen that, during the lifespan of a contract, due to a lack of knowledge of the service on the commissioners' side, the requirements of the contract may not align with the provider's means of providing it. The contractual relationships limit the freedom of the provider to deliver the services. There was more freedom for the voluntary sector providers with the grants schemes. The changing forms of funding from grants to contracts have placed those actors in a more demanding and complex system.

The nature of the work of VSOs is unique, and they need to maintain their social, organisational identity, despite the pressure of the market. Some organisations might adopt hybrid purposes, combining social and economic aims to deliver their mission, although the social nature of their activity prevails. In this new market context, a critical aspect for any organisation is articulating its social mission to answer market requirements. The funders expect to see measurable outcomes and accountability for results in the contract delivery.

Organisational effectiveness - institutional context and socio-economic pressures

The local institutional context in which the organisation exists and acts is essential. Some of the provider organisations in the local context are born because of various socio-economic issues in the institutional context.

Each local contracting authority is facing pressure to address a vast area of public service needs. The actors involved have to achieve their separate missions and fulfil their interests, and, in doing this, they act differently in the market when trying to reach the scope of their mission and values.

The funding approach of the local authorities, embedding social value in contracts and managing it throughout the contract lifespan, varies. The way the voluntary sector organisations, as providers, approach funding with the local contracting authority and think about social value and its management is distinct. The expectations from both sectors differ as they work and advance their agendas from different positions: the demand versus supply side. The local contracting authority institutional instrumental goals are driven by a performance target culture, inspired by the neo-liberalist approach and new public management frame of thinking and action in the service provision. The context is mainly concerned with "how (funders) resources

achieve particular ‘outcomes’ or ‘impact’, and that they should use measures of outcomes as the basis for their decision-making about whom they fund, and how they should manage the performance of those organisations they support” (Knight et al., 2017, p. 8).

The findings show that the commissioning landscape is open and that it has the premises that any organisation can deliver social value if they demonstrate they can do so. However, each organisational typology would provide it differently, depending on their values and the objectives of their operational activities. Barman’s (2016) work on the voluntary sector in the US points out that in the past, voluntary organisations were key players in delivering social purpose services. However, currently, there is no monopoly on whom can create social value (Barman, 2016) as public, non-profit and profit actors could have common social goals. It implicitly raises pressure on the VSOs, increasing the need to show how they make a difference in providing social value services.

From a VSO’s perspective, the social value is part of their identity; the creation of social value is a given. Findings show that social value is intrinsic to their social objectives when addressing the complex needs of a segment of society. Their motivations are also inherent to their mission. Their existence is meaningful because they are built on social needs and discretionary motivations. Their activity aims to create social benefit in various forms, although it is challenging to articulate and evidence the impact of their actions.

Each context matters and is a crucial determinant of how the local contracting authority thinks and plans to embed SVA in its commissioning and procurement process. Each local contracting authority approaches the policy by understanding the policy requirements or learning from other places influenced by what looks like good practice. Some local contracting authorities have embarked on more thorough thinking in understanding the context by adopting place-based strategies (Case B). Others are considering moving at a slower pace and gradually understanding how to approach it.

In the cases, Case A and Case C. Case B, in the local authority strategy for working with the voluntary sector organisations, recognise their commitment to developing place-based community leadership by strengthening the joint working with voluntary sector organisations.

5.2.3 Actors' actions in funding commissioning relationships

The commissioners apply commissioning and procurement practices for their purposes, with instrumental aims in mind. The local authorities use the commissioning as an instrument with varied policy objectives in mind and attain these through their targeted policy achievements.

The approaches in place vary. Some are instrumental at the point of procurement, work in silos, and have specific outcomes set and controlled by the commissioners or political-strategic agendas. While in other places, the commissioners look at and emphasise the process and methodology of delivering the commissioning for outcomes. The focus is on revitalising the role of citizens and values aligned to their needs as a core function.

Public sector utilitarian agenda (utilitarian)

The motivations of the public sector organisations to address community problems have brought a transformation of their actions. They embraced various instruments or means to address them (loans, loan guarantees, grants, contracts, social regulations, economic regulations) (Salamon, 2001, p. 1612). Each of these “tools has its operating procedures, its skill requirements, it is a delivery mechanism” (Salamon, 2001, p. 1613) and makes it a significant development.

Its strategy is to bring policy achievements aligned to the local contracting authority managerial and strategic agenda. The commissioning process focuses on “political considerations as by the appropriateness of the tool for the purpose at hand” (Salamon, 2001, p. 1671).

The policymakers are under pressure from various factors (complex public problems, a preoccupation with efficiency) that direct them towards choosing tools of actions that are challenging to manage and accountability mechanisms that can sometimes meet resistance (Salamon, 2001, p. 1672).

The different ideological modes of operation, the welfare and neoliberal movements have their limitations when being executed, and individually, they both risk being affected by either political or market failures. The function of the guarantor state has emerged (Schedler and Proeller, 2010, p. 26), one who detaches its role in the creation of public services. Its role aims to activate society and encourage it to provide the services, support public/private partnerships, and its role changes into one partner, moderator or catalyst. This new function

places the state in a position to execute responsibility as an enabling authority. In terms of funding, it is for the delivery of the service and guarantor that the service provision happens as per the objectives set out in the contracts with various suppliers (Schedler and Proeller, 2010, p. 27). Such a welfare state is a new form of discourse and modus of operation that “pursues a normative and distributed objective based on the concept of solidarity”.

Problem-solving is central to public action, so this requires a constellation of actors to resolve the issues individually or in complex partnerships. Salmon (2001, p. 1674) has pointed out that this new reality emerged as a new governance approach, which focuses the attention on the “array of tools used to address public problems and on the diverse collection of institutions activated in the process”.

The commissioning field – is an institutional hybrid field. The commissioning policy process cuts across different levels of the systems and, within the process, different organisational structures and interactions come into focus at different levels. The governance focuses on various rules, and there is a range of logic underpinning the usage of the agenda. The contracting approach puts on the agenda elements of the neoliberal orientation of a market economy policy objective to establish an economy based on competition and guarantee the economic freedom of the actors to bring their best goods to the market. Enabling a funding relationship raises a vital core aspect – a contractor who usually needs funding to outsource service to a supplier.

The field of public service delivery is dominated and led by a contractor and supplier of services. The local contracting authority has the lead the service contracted.

The actors have different motives for advancing their agenda. Along with the commissioning tool usage, local contracting authority institutional logics are used to solve the community problems seeking to generate high value at low-cost contracts incorporating social value. When procuring services contracts, the commissioner’s decision criterion is based on their judgemental thinking for the (social) purpose of holding the provider accountable for the delivery of the services and evidence the social value element specified in the contract. There is an intense desire of the local commissioners to alter the behaviour of the supply chain through incentives such as funded commissioning projects. Leveraging offers the local commissioners a way to measure the results achieved through investments and the potential changes brought to the community overall, embedding social value in the contract.

From a strategic perspective, the public sector organisations act in a local community to satisfy collective preferences. However, in a commissioning field, the commissioners’ decision-making tends to reflect the

motivation of being cost-efficient and having the most profitable contracts to reach that common social good. Their strategic point of view, driven by various contextual factors (e.g., austerity, funding cuts, increased social needs), brings highly instrumental purposes to social value. Social value is often seen as a tool to achieve cost savings, make better decisions regarding the providers to deliver services and resource allocation, and achieve long-term benefits in the communities they serve.

Another variation is leveraging the buying power in such a way as to minimise resources, and the trend has been, so far, in investing in large contracts and embedding the social value element into them. This approach affects the providers, such as the voluntary sector organisations in need of funding. To bid for such contracts, they need to create alliances to address the circumstances.

The local commissioners view their relationships with providers to lead the interaction based on procuring and contract management, which includes a hierarchical and legalistic contract of public service delivery. On the other hand, as providers, the VSOs' organisational logics and perspectives are more nuanced, based on their social mission and the rationale for their existence. From the perspective of the voluntary sector's managers related to joining a commissioning funding relationship, the main reason might be the financial resources required for long-term sustainability when delivering their social mission. In addition, it might also be advancing their prestige in providing meaningful social value to the beneficiaries and gaining a competitive advantage in the market for their knowledge of/experience with the local need.

5.2.4 A narrative for change: embedding social value.

Decision-making and change - front-line workers'

The front-line workers in the implementation system of procurement should change their judgement to balance both the economic and social outcomes of the contract. The question 'how' is at the centre of the decision-making process. Many different approaches could be used to achieve the outcome of social value. The policy is not mandatory, and the ultimate power to decide which is the best contractor remains with the front-line staff working in the commissioning.

How to act upon the policy is not self-evident. However, it requires the front-line workers' strategic thinking regarding *how* and the best choice in terms of resource allocation. The change of local authorities' actions derives from recognising that the outcomes are important and matter to the community overall. The question

put at the time of procuring services by the local contracting authorities is “*How do you demonstrate social value?*” So, the focus is on the suppliers’ ability to demonstrate social value.

It is essential to mention that other parameters are used when decisions are made on awarding an organisation a contract. First, it is useful to mention that the focus is mainly on measuring social value and finding the appropriate standards to implement it. So, the decision-making of the front-line workers when awarding a contract is dependent on whether the supplying organisations have those aspects in place, and they can demonstrate the organisational social value achieved. The decisions target those organisations able to articulate and evidence social value. However, it should be mentioned that social value criteria are just a small part of decision-making thinking. As mentioned elsewhere, there is often a percentage put on it, so other critical elements matter and influence the final decisions. It is often the case that significant other concerns overplay the social value because of its small percentage in the contract evaluation criteria. Significant concerns like delivering a cost-effective service are at the core of the decision-making. Thus, rational and instrumental decision-making seems crucial.

Evaluating social value is context-specific. The policy is flexible and is not guided as to how it should be carried out. The policy’s intent of having a public/society-oriented approach at the core of commissioning decision-making is somewhat implicit. It is a shift in thinking regarding focusing commissioning action on society, with a long-term perspective, and adopting a more society/supply-side-friendly oriented model of working. The commissioning services always used to have the beneficiary/ public at its core. It should no longer be a unilateral delivery of service but rather a cycle of interactions that allows relational working to deliver appropriate social value to a local place.

However, the commissioning teams in the local contracting authorities are often focused on procuring services to a particular area rather than adopting a holistic approach. The setting of social value in a context, with this latter approach, requires understanding the context’s needs holistically, which requires a number of strategic task-specific goals to be achieved for a whole commissioning process.

That transition from a just-isolated contract service embedding social value to a holistic engagement process, with a supply chain and citizens, in the pre-commissioning and management of the contracts is early-stage and fragmented. This latter approach has been seen as a means to inform and shape decision-making and service design better. This approach can be indicative of creating better social value within the process. It is indicative that it is not just about serving citizens by delivering a service but engaging them and creating value from the bottom, strengthening the local governance and democracy. However, the local experience shows

that various drivers are influencing their approaches to the most convenient contracts. The resources, time and social issues in the local place are constraints to consider before undertaking specific paths. So, often the mental model of the front-line workers is concerned with how to get a cost-effective commissioned service and purposeful social value targets rather than a relational dimension in the commissioning process able to reach policy objectives.

Overall, this highlights the importance of decision-making and the implication that decisions might have on the services granted and how it shapes the local place.

As already mentioned elsewhere in the study, the SVA does not impose prescriptive requirements, so adopting the policy and deciding to embed social value within procurement practices is a matter of choice. At the top, in the local contracting authorities, the decision-making to implement SVA sits at the top of the political hierarchy. The institutional political lead is usually ready for the change.

At the bottom, the primary actor at the procurement level to undertake and manage social value is the front-line commissioner managing the contract and following it through to its implementation. The data shows that the discretionary approach of the policy influences the take-up with its application. Compliance with the law requires commissioners to publicise the SVA in the tendering bids, but the follow-up after the contract has been awarded is erratic. There are differences in the field, and the decisions taken concerning social value contracts vary among commissioners, departments and regions.

While some bodies think about social value at the procurement stage when awarding contracts, others think about how to use it at the pre-procurement stage. At this stage of the engagement with providers of services, the beneficiaries and the community become a priority. Such a process is inclusive and based on interaction to shape (co-design) and deliver (co-produce) outcomes (implicitly, social value) for the community.

In general, the overall decision-making process is based on various performance assessment contract criteria. In contrast, social value criteria (usually specified as a 5%, 10% or, in some cases, reaching 20%) is just a small part of the overall assessment framework of a contract. The data shows that, often, the decision-making of the front-line workers regarding the social value, which is an element that highlights the quality of the project, is still at the early stage of consideration.

The decision-making thought process is based strategically on the question *How*: How do we appoint the best provider for delivering this service? However, it is hard to say to what extent the *How* goes deeper into the operational work of creation and the delivery of social value by specific providers and how to differentiate

them on that criterion. It is an empirical question fluctuating between optimising the choice and quality of services contracted and provided.

The local contracting authority requirements related to social value focus on evidencing quantitative measures of social impact (social, economic and environmental measures) in the short-term and on outcomes, with a more extended perspective.

Numerous elements influence the decision-making at the procurement stage of a contract evaluation. The price is one of the main priority criteria, which also plays an essential role during the management and delivery of the contract. A vital tension exists around the choice concerning service quality versus the price of the service. Choice is an essential factor in decision-making. By influencing that choice, the institutional logics play a significant role. These logics are, in their nature, to a great extent instrumental in achieving the policy objectives with the minimum resources. Therefore, the priority is to look for cost savings and low-cost contracts with lower quality and social value. It often happens when budgets allocated to the services are squeezed. Such approaches do not favour small-medium providers such as voluntary organisations with social value at the core of their service.

This contentious element in the agenda has significant control over commissioning and procurement practices. A decisive factor in embedding social value within contracts is determined by the question: Does it bring any cost savings and additional benefits to the local community? So far, the mental models of understanding social value are cost savings and checking off what a provider can deliver in terms of cost, efficiency and effectiveness.

When interested in competing and gaining contracts, the providers, either profit or voluntary sector actors, and evidencing social value, are compelled to think about what they do, how they deliver, and the benefits.

The self-efficacy of charities delivering a project is crucial. The payment for a service coming from the local contracting authorities is sometimes low, so finding subsidies in addition to those coming from the government is crucial. Data from the findings in Case C show that a large charity delivering a contract embedding social value was looking to find donations and employ fundraising and the use of volunteers to sustain the work during the life of the contract. The budget pressure on the management of a project can be a contentious element in the behaviour of the charity when taking on added work, which may give rise to continuous monitoring and evidencing social value in-depth. The charity may be obliged to produce the data to satisfy the front-line commissioner requirements during the reporting. There is a need for sustained

financing to continuously keep track and provide evidence of social value, which requires specially skilled staff and time and resources.

5.3 Drivers for change: framing policy & commissioning field purpose

5.3.1 Legislation as a social mechanism - social value as a tool for public policy

In this study, the legislation, the SVA, is one of the first significant mechanisms which plays a substantial role, from the beginning of the field formation, in trying to change the decision-making in the commissioning process and balance it between the financial and social added value of the contracts of public service delivery. Kauppinen et al. (2017, p. 808) point out that, in general, the legislation “can enable and stimulate the emergence of such novel organisations, activities and practices that may help the stabilisation of SAF, in a new context”. Within it, especially in high-capacity states, state facilitation of field formation is almost certainly the norm (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 94). At an institutional level, the state facilitates enacting a policy through the SVA to reshape how procurement works in the public sector. The concept –of social value is considered a procurement buzz phrase in the public sector at the moment (Roberts, 2019).

The SVA is a social policy enacted to transform the commissioning practice for public service contracts, bringing the idea of social value in strategic decision-making, planning and service delivery. The policy opens the discussion on social value in a formal way, within the public service provision and funding relationships, and through its impact on the social development of the local community. Social value is not a new concept; it has been used in various ways over time. Its implicit dimension in the operations of organisations before legislative enactment has been recognised. The government’s concern about the social dimension of public policy action is not new. Data shows that although not recognised formally in the legislation, social value has been delivered implicitly through the work of organisations.

The SVA does not provide a legal definition of social value. The policy offers a broad, vague understanding of the concept, which allows for contextual interpretation. Its stated goals are general, non-contentious, and without clear standards to assess the achievement of social value goals. The legislative frame does not provide a precise meaning in practice on how social value should be used and applied. This policy can be considered a “soft law that does not require compliance but rather tends to specify broad bands of acceptable outcomes, allowing the participants to develop their means of achieving the ends” (Torfing et al., 2012, p. 75). SVA has

a non-prescriptive approach, and its flexibility allows each local contracting authority to set a definition that reflects their distinct characteristics and priorities (NCVO, 2017) and needs appropriately.

The flexibility of the policy leaves room for different paths in terms of implementation. Local authorities comply with it as it is in the legislation, but they prefer the traditional commissioning mechanisms. However, many places have shown appreciation when the policy has opened opportunities. The commissioners see it as a strategic tool to address austerity and the complex needs of the community. These local authorities adopt more creative and innovative approaches and develop their specific social value policies and engagement strategies with the supply chain.

From an ideal strategic perspective, the SVA might be a solution to move from where it is at any particular moment to where you want it to be, making it what you want to happen to achieve an end. The policy aims to shape the action and organisational behaviours of the service suppliers to be more accountable and to evidence outcomes. The data shows that working towards it is not easy, as the focus of the practice is on its measurement. Several techniques have been developed to assess the social impact and outcomes. However, their comprehensiveness cannot capture all the factors (the intended and unintended benefits) contributing to social value creation.

Over recent years, the government has realised that the implementation of the SVA remains slow and piecemeal. It was revised in 2015 to improve its application. However, not enough was done about setting different thresholds or regulating their relevance to the VSOs role in the service provision. Recently (the 2019 consultation), the UK government looked into how the legislation may be taken to the next level. An emerging SAF may require modification to the law or its regulations, but these should not apply just to the central government.

However, one views the SVA it has a certain vagueness that makes it a flexible concept, one that is based on local contracting authorities' political action, with various connotations.

Much needs to be done on empirical grounds to consider social value as a core function of the commissioning and procurement process. Data gathered from some participants stressed the need for the concept to remain vague in legislation as it might mean different things in different contexts, depending on the contextual issues of the local contracting authorities. For such a rationale to function, its understanding in each context is crucial. Rather than copying strategies from other places, it is essential to consider the relevance of social value in one locality and not use interpretations of others.

5.4.2 Embedding SVA

The empirical data shows a mixed uptake. The purposes of the commissioning for social value have, at the top, a social mechanism that regulates it. It is not prescriptive and comes as a supplemental directive to the already existing rules and regulations of the contracting commissioning for outcomes settings. From the outset, the actors should understand the purposes of the field so that commissioning for social value is clearly understood by each agent engaged in the process. Based on such premises, the discussion delves into the directions opened by the policy to transform the field.

First, at a first encounter, the actors' lack an understanding of how to apply the SVA in practice as its social value measurement is not precise. It is critical because the actors need to be able to operationalise and evaluate it objectively. So, question marks regarding the social value and its insight into the procurement process could be potentially tricky due to this lack of understanding.

If put into practice, the policy should make it a duty of the local authorities to consider social value as a supplement when commissioning services. Furthermore, it should encourage local authorities to consider how the services delivered might improve the local community's economic, social, and environmental well-being while assuring the efficient and effective use of the resource's allocation.

The practice shows that the policy does not mandate how the considerations should apply; there is no blueprint for doing it. No model tells how the policy can be applied. Many of the issues in the implementation are related to a lack of knowledge and a lack of process. There is little understanding of the process by either suppliers or commissioners/procurers. It tells us that the policy field and the purposes of social value are still at the early stage of development. The field is much shaped by experiments in practice or the copying of strategies on how it has been established elsewhere.

The commissioning itself is a complex procedure and an essential part of concerns planning. The method of commissioning for social value and the decision-making on embedding a social value element into contracts often happens at the procurement stage, with little attention given to the planning of the service design at the pre-procurement stage. Its social value element becomes part of the service design; it becomes part of the service specification. Thus, the commissioners' job is to ensure that social value delivery is part of the service itself.

The policy points to a mandated element in the process that the local contracting authority must consider (SVA, subsection (3, b)). It is about how the commissioner might act to secure that improvement when conducting the procurement process. Meanwhile, the following sections point out that the commissioner must consider whether to undertake any consultation regarding the matters that fail subsection (3, b). It is understood that in the field of commissioning for social value, the decision-making of the local contracting authority at the pre-procurement stage and the engagement of providers and the community through consultation might be an essential part of the activity considered to be part of the service design itself. Such an initiative creates a SAF-level of interaction, a space of knowledge related to the field purposes held by the actors, with implications on understanding their positions, the requirements of the field, and the opportunities to create alliances and find common interests. Such a new context might be complex for some incumbents (council commissioners). Embedding social value requires skills and knowledge to understand and implement it. Using instruments like a consultation to gain its understanding might be essential for the commissioners' work.

If reliance on the service provider is recognised as needed, it raises control and power dynamics issues in delivering the contract. Also, there is a fear that some commissioners are risk-averse concerning the commissioning rules.

5.3.2 Commissioning practices and the novelty of concepts - outcomes and social value

The commissioning field practices can open avenues for collective, collaborative practice or conflictual and contentious approaches. The value and outcomes of both individual and collective practices regarding social value are subjectively determined. There is always a contentious preference among the stakeholders on what social value creation means as everyone perceives and subjectively experiences social value. The social value in the field and individual services is negotiated and contested among stakeholders. Creating social value for an individual with a particular need might overlook a different need, and finding that balance to attain overall value through the service provided can be challenging.

Some dominating factors prevail in the field, mainly the political agenda. In setting the field purposes, the agents practise and work with ideas and instruments that shape and support policy achievements. The agents have the power to execute and practice these concepts based on their understanding of them. There might be clear guidance on how to implement policy, while there is no clear guidance on how to do it in other contexts.

In this former context, the mental models are crucial, translated through understanding and interpretation of commissioners on using the new concepts in their work.

Having a clear purpose in the field is an ideal to be achieved. It is a practice-driven field, where the actors experience and try different approaches that bring a dimension of innovation in its application. The regulatory framework for commissioning social value does not provide a basis for prescriptive regulations, so a discretionary approach is highly present within the field. Creating a consensual logic of understanding and delivering social value through commissioning practices is not easy, and it raises a contentious side to the interactions. There is contention between the demand and supply sides. The responsibility to create and deliver social value is on the provider side.

Integrating a more collective, collaborative practice on setting social value agenda in the commissioning field is not easy. Within the field, there are many organisations with diverse ways of delivering their activities.

There is fear and contention in the field concerning defining or not defining social value in the commissioning process. Some consider it is essential to have a definition of social value from the outset. While, for others, a definition of social value may limit the work and the possibility of being innovative in creating and delivering social value. Some consider that social value should not be defined as an individual approach to services. However, it should be a collective process, specifically those who deliver and are affected by any given service. However, the element of contention remains present, encompassing whose dominant preferences of social value should be valued, how social value should be negotiated, and what the outcome of the process to create it should be for those involved.

Shared understanding on both sides, on what is required and how to provide it, might be valuable in delivering better services.

The idea of social value and outcomes in the commissioning purposes field is not novel. However, data shows us some gaps related to working with and understanding how to use the concepts. The data shows that the vocabulary used when talking about social value is implicit rather than explicit. The commissioners expect to make it visible through activities delivered in the field and interactions happening in the area. There is a recognition that people understand it and feel it in terms of what it means but trying to articulate it daily in the common vocabulary as it is formally in the policy is not easy.

It is regarding approaches at the individual procurement stage and seeing it in terms of social impact and outcomes delivered by an organisation. While, at the commissioning process level, what matters is the value of the activities used to bring value to the system.

The concept itself is often associated with added value. Some data recognise that social value at the top is less material and tangible in the sense that although you cannot touch it or see it, it is felt. The beneficiary can feel the impact the service delivers on them, especially in the long term.

The interpretations refer to holistic non-financial, social nature elements added through the services provided (e.g., well-being, equality, fairness). It is not easy to operationalise all these elements.

So, an approach to an understanding of social value aligns to social interventions that can bring social welfare, well-being, but translating that understanding into practice brings a gap on how to do it and how to evidence the impact.

The narrative on the social value within the commissioning of contracts does not exclude a discourse of interdependence between the social and economic value.

The commissioning for social value needs to operationalise social value in its measurable dimensions as a parameter of the accountability of contracts. However, the concepts (social value, outcomes) are not yet fully measurable in that way, so the practice is still slow and overloaded with extensive financial accounting and monetisation (Mook et al., 2015, p. 242). Interdependent ways of reporting on social value are required and should be applied. The financial measures often overplay the difficulties in operationalising social value as accountability is an intense form of the responsibility for achieving results in the commissioning field for outcomes.

At an individual, organisational level – we are talking here about a micro-field – outcomes and social value are thought of and interpreted as a total value that the organisation produces for its beneficiaries and the environment where it operates. Because the social value in commissioning is related to outcomes, the concept has been evaluated in that sense, capturing a specific organisation's operational activity. Often, it has been understood in terms of social impact on the community where an organisation operates.

Within the process, the accountability for social value imposes complex pressure, which might be why some commissioners do not consider it. The thinking regarding evidence pointed out developing uniform measurement standards through various tools (SROI, TOMs framework, for example) that gives

commissioners the basic guidelines to make sense of it. However, using such instruments is not always easy. Overall, the approaches to operationalising social value in an organisation are different.

It requires a different way of thinking than when dealing with the organisational level, as the activities and the stakeholders (including the beneficiaries) of a process are much more significant. They involve complex levels of thought, more so than when thinking at a single organisational level. At the commissioning process level, we talk about a methodologic approach of activities and coordination that adds value to the process, providers, and community—seeing the social value created with a commissioning cycle requires attention to the value of the process and how to make a difference to the organisations engaged and the services provided.

Although aware that it is difficult to measure the success of this approach as it requires time and resources, some commissioners consider unlocking their power and social skills in the field. They look to create value through strengthening social capital, social cohesion and social inclusion through investing in and building relationships with the community and the providers. An important aspect when working with the concept from both perspectives is engagement with stakeholders (including the beneficiaries).

However, the commissioners see SVA as a strategic means, lying at the heart of the decision-making process. The concept itself presents challenges in its articulation. What matters most is its thought in decision-making when considering whether to embed the concept with the process. At the procurement stage, the thinking is focused on organisational outcomes and accountability for results. The local commissioner's decision-making at the procurement stage focuses on how the organisations bidding for contracts are evidencing outcomes that they will deliver throughout the contract cycle.

On the other hand, VSOs see social value as representing what they are doing, always present in their work. Articulating social value became necessary for any VSO that needs funding and must be accountable in their relationships with the funders. To keep their position in the field and gain contracts, the VSOs providers need to invest in articulating social value and evidencing it using measurement tools.

Although shaping commissioning contracts with social value is a good thing, its articulation, both on the side of the funders and the recipients of the funding, in the commissioning field is weak and impacts the weight of the social value criteria embedded into the contract. At the margins of the market, small-medium VSO providers recognise that commissioning for social value is a doubtful opportunity to get funds because the social value specified in a contract is at such a low level. It is often not worth engaging in the process when the social value elements count 5% from the contract's overall value.

The commissioning field imposes an accountability culture for results, and often the large charities are prepared to take the challenge. Some are interested to learn more about the measurement tools and if they might work for them. However, regardless of the size and scope of the organisation's operation, there is often difficulty in dedicating time and resources to the process. Everybody is struggling financially and needs full-time commitment to delivering the services, so investing additional time and resources in articulating and evidencing social value needs careful consideration.

The intrinsic nature of the concept of social value is a dimension often intrinsically recognised in practice; there is a sense of what it means derived from interpretations, although the preference is to reflect on it in broad definitional terms. When it comes to unpacking the concept or operationalising it in practice, it is associated with conditions like social capital, social inclusion, and others, which add further complexities.

The commissioning field is complex in itself. It requires investing in understanding the knowledge and skills to provide it. The concept's ambiguity adds further complexity and needs careful consideration when aligning it to context, needs, providers, and priorities in a locality. Some local experiences of commissioning for outcomes are at their early stages, impacting how the processes are delivered.

Social value as local value

Data shows that some local contracting authorities have conceptualised social value as a local value within the commissioning process. The local value refers holistically to nourishing and stimulating the providers and community from the bottom-up by creating social capital, social cohesion, and local networks and keeping the process local. The local dimension of services and the role of local providers, with established experience in providing services to local people and understanding their needs, carries much weight in some councils' experiences. The emphasise on the place and context is essential for keeping the process local and valuing the local agents. They have strong ties with the community and the beneficiaries of the services and can create a partnership to extend the service within the space. The data shows a strong recognition of the role played by the VSOs in promoting public services and delivering social value.

In the UK, the Localism Act of 2011 changed the power of local contracting authorities in England. It offered greater power to communities and smaller voluntary sector organisations to influence their local community. The "potential of social enterprises and community groups to provide high-quality services at good value" (Communities and Local Contracting Authority, 2011) has been recognised.

5.4 Social skills

5.4.1 Sense-making in implementation

Coherence and sense-making

The sense-making, or coherence, work is critical in the implementation of the commissioning practices.

For some participants implementing the social value, the policy has helped delineate practices that allow them to be more cost-effective and do good in the community. Nevertheless, some participants have been less sure about applying the policy and how their work should evidence social value. As a result, they consider that the policy does not apply, especially for some services, and they feel less engaged in and integrated with it.

The policy is discretionary. Sense-making refers to the ability to understand the tasks to be carried out when implementing the policy. There are no crucial tasks and responsibilities in this. Nevertheless, some local contracting authorities try to draw a coherent plan by enacting the SVA policy in their communities. The policy is supposed to draw the social value into the core commissioning functions and make the commissioners more aware of and responsible for it. However, this often becomes a tick box exercise, lacking any consideration of it being meaningfully embedded in daily practices.

Implementation involves knowledge in articulating and assessing the importance of social value for service delivery. The belief in whether it is worth considering often comes from those participants who have worked with contracts requesting social value. In some cases, they recognise, from their existing evidence, the effectiveness and benefits of embedding social value in contract delivery.

Thinking about social value as a concept is not fully conceptualised. It can attribute a meaning to it, but also it can mean various things, depending on the context. In commissioning particularly, induces the sense of change, a new strategic way of thinking and working concerning providers of services. It is not more about sole funders and their strategic interests but the overall commissioning system and its stakeholders.

When working with contracts embedded with social value, the front-line commissioners prefer to ask the providers to articulate and operationalise it and how they are going to deliver it. There is a belief that the providers are good at working with it, articulating and measuring it, which gives them credit to get a contract.

Participants' belief was often closely aligned with the perception that social value should be underpinned by easy-to-measure indicators such as job training, including apprentices. Such belief often came in the conversations. These repetitive objectives were contested by some participants, especially figures coming from the side of the voluntary sector. It is essential to think holistically about the meaning of social value and what it means for service. It can be seen as being more than just a cost of the service. It requires consideration of the services' tangible and intangible aspects and how they relate to the beneficiaries and other stakeholders involved in providing that service.

In terms of making sense of social value, there is the belief that it should be defined with the main stakeholders affected by a particular service programme. Some participants talked about a more relational process, setting primary needs and priorities around the social value policy. Such practices need to be enacted in the pre-commissioning stage to implement the policy more meaningfully. The process at the pre-commissioning stage requires more work and time, involving the main stakeholders, including the beneficiaries, the providers and the community affected by it.

However, the introduction of the SVA policy has changed the existing practice of commissioning to a certain extent. There are positive beliefs in the policy's value and the idea of social value; however, among the participants in the study, few were sure that significant changes had ensued due to its implementation.

Among the different reasons why the value of the policy could be undermined is its implementation. The policy discretion and the lack of a blueprint guide attached to it might have incurred a lack of motivation among commissioners to change their practice. Even before enacting the SVA policy, those who were already mindful of social value found it easier to embrace the policy in their commissioning practices. They recognised it as an opportunity to formalise what they were already doing.

There is a nuanced differentiation in how front-line work defines social value in local contracting authorities and VSOs. The meaning is built on the SVA policy and the subjective understandings of the actors involved in the process. Sometimes actors borrow ideas from one another that they see as best practices without much consideration to analyse the proper perspectives that the concept give to a specific service.

The contentious views on the meaning of social value impact the approach towards creating a shared understanding and an active engagement in including a genuine understanding of social value as a core function of the commissioning process.

The participants' approach to social value is primarily focused on individual services rather than recognising a collective approach to defining social value in a coordinated way. The approach to implementation in terms of understanding and articulating social value and creating a frame of action may also impact whether practices become embedded.

Knowledge work for the individual front-line workers (internalisation) and the mental sense-making models around it often results in commissioners working in isolation.

Often, because the commissioners have the power in the contract, the service specifications may not include the social value criterion. Often, when included, the reference to social value points towards SVA policy. In practice, rarely is there a framework of shared understanding of the aims, objectives and expected benefits with the SVA. Although, at early stages, a few participants had worked towards changing the practice and being more mindful about the importance of a shared understanding of service design outcomes and social value (e.g., the co-design of service specifications). In Case B, the commissioning and policy teams put effort into formalizing a policy approach for the commissioning process and implementing it. The team working on the SV policy in the local authority also put efforts into educating and informing the other departments in the local authority about its development. The education, learning and supporting this process to raise awareness with its potential benefits became crucial.

When the participants talked about their role in embedding social value or understanding social value for a service, they mostly used the form 'I' or 'it' (the supplier organisation) when discussing the need to define and evidence social value in a contract. However, on the contrary, some front-line workers talked about the need for shared understanding and a collective team approach to defining the social value of a service. In this latter context, there is the recognition that social value is dependent on the preferences of the stakeholders and their needs. Therefore, a positive step is to hear these voices bringing a shared understanding of what is needed and prioritising what is meaningful to increase social value through a contracted service.

5.4.2 Policy interpretation and shared meaning - contentions

Social value and its development processes in the commissioning process and its aims can be seen in diverse ways, depending on the examination standpoint and the purpose attributed to the social value.

In this study, the policy (SVA) acts as a mechanism that, in reality, can take the form of any actual entity, whether an institution, an agent's psychological or biological condition, or a policy discourse. The motive, the process, or the factor in a concrete system produces a result (Banta, 2012, p. 390).

The social tools (in this case, SVA) have contributed to introducing the social value term into the commissioning field. In a SAF field, the policy shapes the field environment and the actors' behaviours and actions. The policy requires a rethinking of the rules of commissioning contracts based on social value criteria.

The policy formulation is broad and vague, so it shapes commissioning based on the actors' strategic interests and interpretations. There is an increasing awareness among the actors on the opportunities and benefits of taking account of the SVA policy in the service provision. However, when dealing with it, there is difficulty in articulating and operationalising it.

The agency is an essential factor in the matter. In terms of policy formulation and interpretation, the interpretability of policy texts depends upon a measure of shared assumptions among social agents about the case, intentions and beliefs, and social relations. "The production and interpretation of any text rest upon generally implicit (and often counterfactual) validity claims concerning what is the case (the 'truth'), the intentions and beliefs of agents ('truthfulness'), and the relation of the text to its social context ('appropriateness')" (Fairclough et al., 2004). Policy texts might be incomprehensible to the actors because they are given insufficient guidance on interpreting them in practice.

A recent survey on public sector organisations and SVA in the procurement process shows their understanding of the importance of the policy. The results show "42% – saying their primary motivation for including social value within procurement is because it is "the right thing to do", and two-thirds of participants to the survey suggesting they had "limited understanding of what social value is" showing that "yet there has been difficulty in presenting the importance and work of social value in an easy to understand format" and that there is a "continued need to improve understanding of the concept" (Roberts, 2019).

To effectively work together, participants felt commissioners and VSOs needed to communicate well. It requires a shared language. As many participants noted, there is even "a wide variation in local understanding and interpretation of 'social value', suggesting that it would be "helpful to agree with some clear definitions". Depending on whom you are talking, and who the audience is, you have different interpretations of social value.

There is a contention element in the procurement process. It induces competing agendas and organizational performance in articulating and evidencing social value for a service to get a favourable decision from the funders awarding contracts of social value. Some incumbents with more influence in the field than other providers tend to use social value to their strategic advantage.

The interpretation and operationalisation of what social value is either in the hands of the commissioners or is influenced by large providers, such as corporates that impose their CSR programmes agenda, thus conflating the social value with CSR intentions. Therefore, the social value fluctuates in the hands of different influential actors in terms of its interpretation. However, the ultimate power resides on the side of the local contracting authority to decide on the providers' offers and relevance for the services contracted. When the commissioners do not have a clear agenda on what social value means for service, they might be influenced by the most influential strategic providers. Because the local contracting authority does not have a plan regarding the social value, they take for granted what the profit organisations are offering without contesting it.

The scenarios often seen through the lens of data are i) the local contracting authority invites the suppliers competing for the commissioning projects to define social value for the projects that they intend to deliver and evidence it; ii) The local authorities are influenced by the proposed projects with the social value offered by large private organisations.

The extent to which actors are successful at collaborative symbolic activity depends on the availability of resources, power relations and the actors' ability to produce such meanings accepted by those whose involvement is necessary (Kauppinen et al., 2017). Kauppinen et al. (2017) point out that Fligstein and McAdam's (2012, p. 92) terminology for field formation and settlement require the activation of cultural meaning projects or collaborative symbolic activity through discourse used to produce new cultural frames. Moreover, "every field is born not so much of shared interests as of a creative cultural process that binds field members together through a constructed narrative account of the new collective identity that unites them and the shared mission that is at the heart of the field" (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 110). The lack of shared consensual meaning and plans around it raises contentious structural issues concerning its implementation.

5.4.3 Skilled actors and framing action

The data in the evidence draws us towards appreciating the label of *frame of action* in the public relations of the field. The frame is a valuable concept in SAF theory, which refers to the decision-making being focused on the best way to describe individuals' actions to achieve the desired goals.

Hallahan (1999, p. 215) highlights how framing for action involves focusing on persuasive attempts to maximise cooperation in which no independent options or choices are involved. The concern in the field is with how to frame actions necessary to achieve compliance with the desired goals. Citing Levin, Schneider and Gaeth (1998), who define it as *goal framing*, Hallahan (1999, p. 216) points out that a positive action (goal) involves focusing on obtaining a positive consequence (gain). Such activities are seen in our data emerging in specific contexts, where the participants talk about the preventative actions taken in the service delivery embedding social value. The actors' self-efficacy is significant, "and whether a person believes that following a particular action will lead to the desired outcomes" is also recognised. Some researchers define framing "as a device for mobilization wherein groups attempt to create linkages (like building relationships or coalitions) among otherwise disparate individuals through a process of frame alignment" (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986), cited in Hallahan (1999, p.215)).

Much of the mobilisation effort is framing (e.g., Snow, 2004, cited in Laamanen and Skåén, 2015), whereby SAF actors continuously engage in existential interests through meaningful production and maintenance practices. Framing represents the social construction of issues in an interplay of incumbents, challengers and their environments (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). It is seen as a conflict of competing claims about aspects of reality. Framing is an agentic endeavour of connecting with and manipulating political, cultural, and economic discursive fields: "Frames and the political and cultural environment in which they are expressed work in combination to move desired political outcome" (McCammon et al., 2007, p. 726, cited in Laamanen and Skåén, 2015). The salience of a frame is derived from tapping into the hegemonic discourses within the discursive field. The success of a frame is connected to broader cultural references, such as values, beliefs and ideologies (McCammon et al., 2007).

Framing as the mobilisation of cultural resources further connects to mobilising various other resources. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) see field stability produced mainly through successful access, accrual and application of these resources. The incumbents are positioned to survive due to their material, cultural, and political resources (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

The framing of the SVA in the commissioning process might be of crucial significance. As the incumbent, the discourse initiated by the local contracting authority, shaping the contracting rules in the commissioning process is essential. The benefits of the alignment with their strategic interests might prevail. As per their policy interpretation, it might be formulated around the cost-effectiveness of the service provision.

A common situation is when the commissioning market has rules concerning the commissioning of embedding social value, which does not offer any flexibility because the local contracting authority is the one that dictates compliance. The VSOs compliance with the commissioning practice often is not easy, especially for the small-medium providers that are more in a position of challengers within the field. In addition, articulating and evidencing the social value of their operational activities requires a shift in how they traditionally work and an investment of resources that often are lacking. For VSOs, there is a lack of knowledge to adequately address the commissioning requirements and a lack of resources to engage with it before procurement. Hence, they expect organisations to come with their offer. The ones that work with social value and genuinely deliver it and evidence it might be a significant added value for the service delivered. However, there are often offers that resort to offers of social value that are repetitive and easy to measure (e.g., employment training).

In a positive framing of commissioning a contract, the importance of delivering social value through it may be stressed, encouraging a process of continuing co-production and interaction between the actors involved to constantly maintain the appropriateness of the service to the direct beneficiaries. Positive framing is used to ensure the social value of service on several dimensions; for example, safety, fairness or equity for all the actors involved.

Furthermore, a negatively framed message might be evident in situations where there are tensions concerning how the contracts of social value are delivered and to whom.

Conversely, negative framing does not leave much choice other than being compliant with a social value criteria rule and being accountable for it by reporting quarterly, for example, on some achieved measures. A negative framing might result from a contentious element when defining the social value for a service and how to achieve it. The dynamics of power often interfere in agenda-setting. The local contracting authority might impose their views on delivering. At the same time, a supplier, like a VSO, finds it challenging to follow a different pathway of service implementation because of their established way of delivering the service. The contentions are varied, and the controversies between politics and the front line can negatively impact the desired outcomes.

The field is not stable, and the actors act to implement the SVP frame; their actions, which are messages regarding the social value, are not static. The data shows that Case B aimed to withhold taking a position on social value policy because of various issues in the context. They decided to reconfigure their relationships with the other actors in the field. So, there is a continuous process of reshaping and reframing the relationships in commissioning in times of crisis. Because of political crises, the political elites instigated a massive push behind the reconfiguration of the goal framing by local contracting authorities related to procurement issues. Desirable actions, including the elaboration of a social value policy, were taken, in different ways to enlist cooperation from crucial groups, including the VSOs. It involved the specific preparation of those groups to attain the requirements of the contracting relationship.

Nevertheless, the issue of authority impacts mainly on how the funding and the resources are allocated. This impact is reflected in the decision-making and the commissioners' action in awarding large contracts and low-cost service delivery. Such a line of action by the front-line workers to reach the required outcomes of the commissioned services raises contention in the relationships with the other supply chain actors that cannot attain such requirements.

A commissioner might award a contract to one particular large corporate or charity because they have low-cost service delivery. For a small-medium charity, this is discouraging. Often, they do not bid because they think they will never win a large contract. They do not consider bidding for a contract, whether the social value is specified or not.

5.4.4 Framing a collective line of action

Under conditions of uncertainty or crisis within a field (like austerity and the cuts in budgets allocated to services), a new shared sense of power relations emerges (Bozic et al., 2019, p. 60). This uncertainty leads to skilled strategic action by actors, which involves isomorphic tendencies and the building of coalitions between either dominant groups (incumbents) or challenger groups. An example of innovative collective activities might be co-design and co-produce outcomes. Some social skills actors might be able to activate this innovative collective action.

The local contracting authority, as the incumbent, controls the service delivery field and has the power to activate and reshape the commissioning process by mobilising resources. In this situation, one can see how

the local contracting authority frames lines of action in setting a strategic agenda and the discursive narrative on the importance of social value, starting with its definition to implementation. The strategic policy agenda with the social value might be set through a top-down approach or by mobilising innovative collective action within a shared framework of action aligned with the social needs and priorities in the local community to inform the commissioning process better. The uncertainty might be a driving force to engender stability encouraging the actors to try innovative means to reach an end by activating a bottom-up approach of working together in setting the purpose agenda for commissioning social value, designing the service and implementing it.

Local contracting authorities are skilled actors who, in the commissioning field, have the power to enact innovative collective action. The skills of the commissioners to make meaning of and apply the SVA has been under question. The policy adds a step on the side of the commissioners to consider social value when commissioning services, although it is not prescriptive. The skills required from the commissioners when scoring and embedding the social value in the contracts are at different levels:

- a) At the level of a strategic model of thinking, planning and decision-making:
 - There is a need to leave behind the conventional way of commissioning a contract and balancing both the financial and social benefits of the contract.
 - A new innovative broader thinking can make a difference: understanding what is required from the outset, applying it in the design of the services, knowing what to expect and request from the providers competing for a contract.
 - Having the skills to decide who is the relevant provider can bring genuine social value to the services. It requires a preliminary understanding of the market and learning about the needs.
- b) Skills to activate innovative collective action within the field:
 - Traditionally, commissioners thought about contracting services as a form of control over the provider. The power of decisions and knowledge of the priorities resides with the local authority experts and commissioners. The perception of the supply chain role, mainly the voluntary sector, is that it delivers services; it does not co-design policy and strategy. That usually has been in the control of the local authority, so thinking differently about it requires a shift of thinking regarding working relationships in practice. It also requires skills to adapt to such demands, which adds complexity to the work, time and resources of those involved to invest in the engagement processes.
 - Within a complex field such as commissioning, where there is a need for extensive technical skills and knowledge to deliver the process, bringing new elements such as social value and outcomes brings additional complexities to the process.

- c) Skills to understand the social appropriateness influencing the work delivered:
- Developing these skills is strongly connected to social skills and activating collective actions within a context of contention. There is the pressure of various shocks that influence the behaviour of the agents within the field.
 - When the diverse agents (service providers) are marginalised and underplay the funding relationships at varying levels (budgets cut, competition and severed relationships with suppliers, erosion of trust and legitimacy), the ability to mediate solutions to bring a certain level of stability to the field is crucial.
 - Within this context, the incumbent, who has the appropriate control of the policy and its execution, needs the proper skills to enable stability and orientation in the field to attain the final policy achievements required. The complexity of the field might discourage the incumbent from doing that as it requires much innovative thinking and strategic planning to create a new field and perspectives to take action and reconfigure a new position for the agents engaged within it. The commissioning for social value strongly emphasises the social aspects and actors' relationships in the commissioning process's decision-making, design, and delivery. Therefore, the skills to activate and support an understanding of the community's needs where the social interventions occur and to plan appropriately for these social, environmental and economic needs becomes crucial.

The practice shows awareness of a need to understand the local needs better and whether the relationships should be readdressed. Case B shows that changes are happening to a certain extent, with more interaction being invested in understanding those actors' needs, despite tensions within the commissioning field. Instead of traditional commissioning procedures, more hybrid forms of funding relationships are being targeted because workshop co-design mechanisms shape the services design outcomes and funding from the supply chain. Such choices mediate the challenges and support the transition of small-medium local providers from relying on grants to commissioning, avoiding, at this stage, the established traditional procurement processes. Although the commissioning principles lead the process, they mediate and open up a level playing field to small-medium providers to be more confident in applying for funding. As a strategic means of changing their commissioning and procurement practices, first, they frame their policy goals in a new light, putting a social value policy in place. The social value charters and toolkits guide the process of the SVA implementation in some local authorities contexts. These instruments have spread knowledge on social value and how it should be embedded in the commissioning process.

5.5 Interaction and practices in commissioning social value

5.5.1 Interactions in commissioning for social value

When the participants talked about the relationships between the local contracting authorities and VSOs as services providers, they often referred to tensions. Traditionally, the provider-supplier split has always been acknowledged, and this has become clearer with the contracting of public services. Critical tension is rooted in the power-dependence relationships between the local authorities and the voluntary sector providers. However, there are some mutual social interests and organisational values shared by those sectors. For various reasons, the government relies on the VSOs, and commissioners recognise these organisations' critical role in reaching diverse, vulnerable sections in the community. Also, some of those organisations' providers depend on council funding to deliver their social mission.

Participants like the VSO managers revealed that funding needs are a reality; however, when entering into such relationships with the contracting authority, the imposed funding regulations might put much pressure on the way they traditionally deliver services.

The participants voiced the belief that the social value criteria in the contracts should bring the opportunity to bid for funding, but various factors discourage them from doing so. To be able to encourage VSOs to bid for funding, a new way of working is needed on both sides, with more power-sharing, rather than just the imposition of rules and exercise of control over contracts on the side of the commissioners.

This study has found that local authorities in the commissioning process play a key role as incumbents. The control on the contract delivery remains with the funder, although recognising the element of relational and collective action is emerging in the relationships. Often, front-line working participants in local contracting authorities mentioned their openness to collaborative working funding relationships and learning and improving the services in the pre-commissioning stage or over the contract's life span. How the agenda of social value is framed is very much in the hands of the incumbents. The commissioners (incumbents) have the power to set the norms and rules of the policy field.

The incumbents, who aim to shape the field to their advantage to reach instrumental policy goals, might not understand how to use the policy and shape the purposes of the field with the social value to achieve the policy outcomes. The field might not be led by those that have a good understanding of social value.

All the actors (incumbents and challengers) compete for a winning position in the field. The commissioning market field might be set to their advantage or not. Some might be prepared and have expertise in promoting and shaping their position to their advantage, gaining credibility in the field. In contrast, others do not have the same capability. Because of their limited financial sustainability and other required resources, some of them might not keep their influence in the field (VSOs challenger's position).

The field is controlled by those with the expertise and resources to lead large contracts, while the challengers, usually small-medium VSOs, cannot engage in large commissioning contracts. However, on rare occasions, they might impose themselves enough to reshape the social order with new rules to help them. The contexts where the sector is very dynamic and with a strong voice in expressing their position can reshape the field (case B in this study).

In those contexts, they have a strong voice and are dynamic in influencing the incumbent's decisions. The rationale is also because the incumbents recognise the value of challengers' work at the local level. Also, the engagement agenda reshaping the traditional commissioning style for outcomes is high on the political agenda. So the challengers' position is essential and is shifting, to a certain extent, the agenda priorities to the incumbents.

This favourable context is the result of a mixture of opportunities within the field. Such shifts occur because of various shocks and exogenous factors (i.e., political scandals, erosion of trust, budget cuts and austerity, complex socio-economic determinants) in the context and conflicts that lead to social change (Case B).

It is recognised from data that some incumbents choose to change their way of doing things, from the pre-commissioning stage, when the challengers (VSOs) might have a voice to reshape the design of service specification in the commissioning through consultation. When the local contracting authority is more open to sharing power in setting the agenda, they can set the outcomes framework through the co-design and co-production of services. However, this rarely happens due to the stringent rules of commissioning. Currently, the small-medium charities are falling outside of the commissioning frameworks and are not shaping the social value projects delivery. These aspects depend mainly on the incumbents' social skills framing abilities to reshape the field's goals using a more collective-relational approach.

The evidence in our findings also shows that one way the VSOs could advance their voice could be in the pre-tendering phase, where they have the chance to promote their expertise and shape the service specifications in the tendering process. However, the data shows that there is a range of positive or contentious aspects raised by this.

Some participants recognise that such an approach might have “*positive implications as if the service specifications are sector-driven and then the chances to require further the engagement of the VSOs in delivering the projects are higher*”. (CVS, Case B).

However, some voices believe that such an approach is against the commissioning rules of competition. Also, for some organizations, such a process means that those who participate in the pre-commissioning should not attend the tendering process, as that might give them a competitive advantage.

As for the other aspects, the framing approaches of the local contracting authorities might involve inclusive strategies. Some councils’ cases (Case B) show a willingness to open the relationships and support the capacity building of these small-medium providers. There is a recognition that those organisations bring value to the service, primarily through their relationships with service users and volunteers. There is a growing positive awareness that the work that the VSOs are doing in the local community is outstanding and essential work. It is recognised that VSOs can connect with hard-to-reach people, and their knowledge about these people is an asset to the local contracting authority. So, there is a recognition that it is essential that the local contracting authority, who has control over the resources, should open up and try to work out these relationships in a meaningful way. So, the power aspect of the connections is an essential aspect in the commissioning, as is a greater willingness to share the power. The nature of commissioning for outcomes is changing; each actor is looking to influence the field to their advantage.

Power dynamics

The VSOs, as challengers in SAFs, are in a contentious position in the commissioning process.

The fact that SAF actors, like VSOs, have a collective understanding of the purposes and rules of the field does not imply agreement on the commissioning field’s constitution. In the market, VSOs always have issues requiring them to adapt their strategies: they “face the problem of adapting their strategies and tactics to changing environments, as the context in which they operate may become more or less favourable” (Della Porta and Diani, 2006,19, cited in Laamanen and Skålen, 2015).

In the field, they might resist the rules imposed by the incumbents, and the field’s political claims might work against those organisations’ social values. When the social skill of incumbents and challengers is roughly equal, successful mobilisation rests on the ability to manoeuvre frames and collective identities innovatively.

It translates into cooperation and the possibility of conflict on several distinct levels, namely, between field actors and fields, translating into differences in outcome (Laamanen and Skåéen, 2015). Challengers construct value co-creation around grievances caused by contesting the incumbents' dominance of the SAF (Laamanen and Skåéen, 2015, p. 386).

The following table (Table 5.2) outlines the various approaches and positioning of the supply and demand sides of the services that emerged from the data.

Approach one – VSOs are actively engaged in commissioning for social value projects. They take a collective-contentious stand to advance their position in the market.

Approach two – VSOs take a contentious position towards the market. The interaction is minimal, although the organisations would like to be involved. They see the SVA legislation as an opportunity, but the field does not favour their engagement. The commissioning field environment sets rigid restrictions that small-medium VSOs cannot meet. They cannot break the barriers and make their voice heard and valued in terms of the social value that they create. Conversely, the local contracting authorities acknowledge the value of those organisations to create social value, so there would be an inclination to adopt a more collaborative relationship with them, although such relationships are fragmented.

Approach three – VSOs do not look into funding with the local contracting authorities and uses other funding sources (donations, fundraising); they resist the market.

Table 5.2 Approach/Models positioning the VSOs towards the social value contracts in the market

<i>Model one: VSOs shapes the market and negotiate their positions</i>	<i>Model two: VSOs are not in the market, although they are very interested</i>	<i>Model three: VSOs take an independent stand</i>
<p>Large VSOs are good in delivering their message concerning social value. They have a department specifically dedicated to writing bids, and they know the language that the commissioners require and what they are looking at.</p> <p>The staff, however, is very committed to the social mission of their work; they express their voice when the commissioner asks them to deliver something unrealistic.</p> <p>There is not much time dedicated to understanding and operationalising social value or monitoring it; the focus is mainly on emphasising that they bring additional value through volunteering and corporate donations.</p> <p>There is the matter of capturing these number in percentages, but this is not a real concern with holistic monitoring of the service, and evidence from just a few case studies in the quarterly reporting.</p> <p>The social value aspect of the service is much more around feelings over the success of the service, in terms of attendee numbers.</p>	<p>Small VSOs recognise their challenges in getting contracts embedding social value with the local contracting authorities.</p> <p>There are challenges in terms of contract regulations, which have an impact on their social mission.</p> <p>There are problems with time and resources to respond to bids and invest in bid writing.</p> <p>Competition is not appreciated.</p> <p>The technical language and articulation of social value that they are creating remains a puzzle.</p>	<p>They do not have the time or resources to follow up on the local contracting authority legislation, which requires technical knowledge and skills to respond to it.</p> <p>The social value criteria in the contracts are too low, which means other elements prevail. Therefore, the large organisations are favoured from the start and they are not worth bidding for.</p> <p>They are looking for new ways and approaches to get alternative funding (foundations funding, the European Social Fund, donations, fundraising).</p>

Source: Researcher elaboration

5.5.2 Emerging practices of the commissioning process

No single model of commissioning for social value is evident. Instead, each case study (Case A, B and C) has developed distinctive ways of working through their local context, with Case B being more engaged than the others.

The case study data on the landscape of commissioning shows that it is practised differently in different places. There are constraints (and opportunities) of action related to commissioning for social value from the actors' perspectives, so the field changes as actors undertake various strategies, which leaves great latitude for the possibility of piecemeal change in the actors' positions.

Typically, the language of the contracting of public services highlights the trajectories of the commissioning for outcomes as a model of delivering public services by the local authorities. The policy and rules in place set the field to be respected, in that sense, by each agent that exercises strategic agency to win contracts with social value. If applied in practice according to the quality standard model (mentioned in an early section of the literature review), it is an empirical question, and the modes of working through the commissioning for outcomes vary in scope, extent and the depth of embedding social value criteria as a core function.

The common language used in the commissioning process aims to evidence outcomes. Some of the cases have a standardised model of commissioning and a procurement process in place, with clear policies and strategic models (see Case B) that currently are working towards commissioning for outcomes and co-production with the service providers. Clear communication concerning the commissioning rules seems to be an essential aspect for the service providers. Traditionally, the bureaucratic process of the online procurement portals, the short time allotted for calls for tendering, and the lack of time given to prepare proposals are among the issues that the small-medium voluntary sector providers face.

Some hybrid forms of funding are also being developed, accommodating the smaller providers in the local community (Case B). Some local contracting authorities have decided to change the procurement process, moving to a process that is not a traditional grant process. However, it is not a public sector contract, either. They are taking the best bits from the procurement process, such as openness, transparency, the fairness, and thus making it a more friendly approach. It is bridging the gap because of the innovative approach based on co-production and the degree of cultural change accompanying it. The introduction of outcomes-focused funding, which is new, is also seen as favourable. Case B was focused on outputs until recently. All the old grant schemes focused entirely on the number of people who received their services. A cultural change is

required of the organisations to understand how to work with outcomes rather than outputs. Another feature of this approach is that the assessment of the commissioning contracts was based more on financial/economic considerations and less on social outcomes. The shift and transformations undertaken in the commissioning process are cultural shifts.

Commissioning approaches

The policy requirements are focused on advancing the model of commissioning for outcomes. In service specifications and the design of the service, the vocabulary focuses on achieving what matters to people.

Commissioning approach 1 – embryonic consideration and thinking about social value

In Case C, the feeling was that the commissioning and procurement process was focused on the tendering and procurement phases of the commissioning cycle. The process was based on decision-making based on the criteria of getting the best service and price and encouraging competitive relationships and expectations (see the Commissioning 1.0 – commissioning cycle, Hunter, 2019, p. 10). The findings support that status, especially those from voluntary sector organisations, which recognise that commissioners work in silos and favour competitive commissioning for cost reduction. Many of the priorities set by the local commissioners dominate the agenda. Each commissioner approaches the social value and considers it in the service contracts in a distinct way, usually on a discretionary basis, and applying a scoring depending on the contract (2% or 5% from the total weighting of the contract). There are cases where the commissioner does not consider that the service requires an element of social value and provides a rationale for such a decision.

On the side of the funders, there is a recognition in terms of the understanding and evidence of social value – very supply-led focused. The commissioners expect the VSOs, as providers, to know what social value is because of their social mission and delivery. So the pressure on the VSOs to articulate and evidence the impact that their activities delivery is high.

The decision on purchasing a service is very much about the individual instrumental use of resources trying to get the best service that it can get. One commissioner described his thinking regarding buying a service from a provider as buying a fridge at a supermarket and evaluating the product's characteristics, benefits, and costs and making a decision based on that.

In terms of contractual funding relationships, the power exists with the local contracting authority as the funder of the contract. While observing the quarterly meetings of contract reporting on social value delivery between a commissioner and charity project manager, it was noted that the sessions were relatively informal and that conversations were conducted in a friendly manner. It has been observed a constant reporting and checking up on the commissioner's side concerning the meeting of targets set in the contract. The discussion on social value was a small part of the overall conversation. The reporting focused was mainly on targeted numbers and the achievement of measures. The reporting document structure focused on many of the activities to be delivered and required by the contract. In the last section of the reporting document, the commissioners and charity project managers discussed some relevant case studies that evidenced the improvements with the service delivered and the challenges encountered in their work. The outcomes were largely overshadowed by other priorities, like the activities, the number of volunteers, the number of families benefitting from the services. Also, the social value was seen in terms of measures that evidenced donations from private organisations. The number of volunteers brought value to the organisation and was recognised as adding social value to the service.

In the project team of service delivery, it can be seen that there is a shared purpose in work and, when there is not, the project manager, during the meetings with the commissioner, raise the issue of the unmatched expectations of the commissioner and the reality of practice. The service contract reporting comes in the form of the quarterly reporting document that focuses on checking the percentage of targets reached in the requested period.

The VSO project manager also recognised that it was essential to maintain a clear social mission. He outlined the importance of feedback to the commissioner when some challenges or problems arose. The issues could be either in terms of the contract demand requirements or within the delivery of the contract. An open-minded commissioner who knows what work is required or not during service delivery makes a difference, but this depends on the local contexts, which vary.

In this context, there are fragmented initiatives for engagement. However, the commissioner does not engage with service providers or communities to shape the outcomes/social value in the service design specifications. Often, the engagement techniques used are limited to information and consultation. Such approaches often do not give voice to the providers or users when shaping the service design, which is still in the commissioners' control.

On the other hand, Case A, which is a case in which the development of a formal social value policy framework was considered, shows the efforts needed to embed social value in the commissioning and procurement process officially. The council did practice scoring on social value in a fragmented way, especially in the construction infrastructure projects and some social services. However, the commissioners recognised that they had questioned the social value in the contracts, so there was an intrinsic recognition of social value creation. The procurement manager talked about the fact that social value was seen as an inherent feature embedded in the contracts. However, there was no explicit social value policy in place. Several internal policy team meetings were held to set the agenda, but they were then delayed due to budgetary issues. The findings show how this local contracting authority made efforts to change their vision on improving the lives of the residents, emphasising the need to overcome the challenges of austerity and empower people, thus contributing to inclusive growth and fostering new relationships based on citizenship and participation. In this context, the traditional grants-based funding relationships with the voluntary sector had changed entirely to outcome-based commissioning contracts. The local contracting authority used the consultation process to inform their priorities and actions to deliver better residents' outcomes. The consultation process enabled the delivery of a strategic document that embodied the overall community vision, themes and targets identified by the residents. The policy strategies and language pushed towards the need for broad consultation and engagement with the citizens. Some fragmented commissioned initiatives, funded by the council, brought the need for participation and co-production, encouraging citizens to be active through different activities. It became a more community-empowered model that enabled the independence of individuals. It awakened their entrepreneurial and social spirit to help revive the community and contribute towards a more inclusive borough.

The model of the council in Case A, and its commissioning culture, presented a challenge to the power dynamics in the relations with its supply chain and voluntary sector organisations. The observations show different views (the policy team officer in Case A talks about 'various egos') and working methods. However, the relationships with all the stakeholders and supply chain are praised.

The local authority emphasised the power of data and the importance of having control and measuring the data to understand the community's needs. It has a dedicated data analysis department that has worked hard to collect measurable social data over the past years, based on secondary data documentation from various sources. Its creative and innovative approach has made the council the first local borough to develop a social data platform that allows them to see social indicators that are performing poorly and the areas that are performing well. The dataset generated is considered within the council to be a powerful tool that will influence decision-making related to the commissioning and procurement process and the services that need

to be prioritised. During the meetings dedicated to discussing the social value internal document, the discussion on the social data platform tool focused on introducing it as a complementing tool, supporting the initiative to develop a social value policy. The council invests hugely in research and innovation and in learning from secondary data. From observational reflections, this local contracting authority tends to consider that data is essential. It offers power and control over its policy achievements and is a critical enabler in procurement decision-making.

Such an approach brings about specific imbalances in the power dynamics and, in some cases, has implications for the funding relationships with the providers. The local contracting authority's position is straightforward regarding their relationships with the VSOs. It emphasises the need for a cultural change of the local mindset of the voluntary sector and the transition from grants to contracts. The charity sector needs to adapt to the contracting culture. The local authority invests in their capacity. It supports them with knowledge in finding alternative funding solutions outside the council.

All these dynamics brings tensions into the relationships; many brought about by challenging attitudes and behaviours and the erosion of trust in connections.

In both cases, a hybrid way of thinking and approach to the commissioning of social value were employed. The model applied the mixed-use of general outcome orientation. There is a feeling that the departments of the local contracting authority work in silos, i.e. using the commissioners' agenda of procuring services (see Case C) with only limited engagement with people, communities and suppliers when discussing outcomes and social value.

In Case A, the data shows a resolutely innovative data-driven council. This case employed some broader, innovative strategies to establish the blocks of outcomes and priorities of its policy through consultation with over 1000 residents in the local borough. This case recognises and uses an outcome agenda that presumably has been informed by the community voice as the document informs both the corporate plan of the local contracting authority and the procurement process and undertakes annual reviews of the progress made.

Commissioning approach 2 – outcome thinking and SVA

The approach is oriented strategically towards engagement with the essential stakeholders, suppliers and the community (Case B) and collaboration among the commissioning department within the council.

In this case, there is a formal commitment to commissioning for outcomes and co-production. By taking such an approach, it has been recognised that, holistically, the community citizens' outcomes are essential, as are the local providers delivering the services to meet those outcomes.

The strategic approach emphasises how interaction, through innovative collective action, to set a suitable agenda can shape the local community's needs to become a priority. The same approach has been adopted in funding relationships. Outcomes and indicators for each group of issues that matter in the local community have been co-designed. Various organisations attending the workshops brought to the table their insights into the outcome specifications. Although these processes gave the feeling of sharing power with the local organisations, the control over the final strategy stayed with the local contracting authority.

However, the process matters as it allows for flexibility when defining outcomes that are important to suppliers (who, in their terms, have a dialogue with their service users) and will enable them to express their voice on what is important to them and their beneficiaries. The process itself opens up a continuous cycle of interaction, which impacts the overall process of commissioning. Among those interviewed, a particular emphasis was placed on developing relationships at the pre-commissioning stage (through service design workshop co-decision). So, significant emphasis was given to the pre-tendering procurement stage.

It involved different sets of meetings and workshops drawing on co-design and co-production with the VSO organisations. The voluntary sector organizations in this context are considered essential to the debate because of their local intelligence and real-life experience with the category of vulnerable people that needs the most attention. The commissioner talks about these new processes as a phase of learning from the providers, offering an opportunity to gain experience related to needs and align the process with the commissioning programme.

In this organisational setting, a progressive change in policy strategies and regulations takes place. Specific dedicated policy documents attest to the new co-production approach of the council, and a social value policy is adopted. In this context, a strategy has been developed for the VSOs as part of the council's new vision. These strategic documents regulated the partnership working relationships with the sector. The practice shows an orientation towards more joint working between the voluntary sector and the community overall. The changes are also visible in the level of commissioning, and some data provided by the commissioners highlights a cultural shift that they are looking forward to because they believe the journey has just started. There is an acknowledgement of the tensions created when working with new concepts, raised around understanding outcomes and social value, understanding what co-production means and using it in a

meaningful way. Although there is a social value policy in place, which applies mainly in large construction contracts, the council has a great movement to have conversations and help senior-level managers and procurement teams understand the shift.

The data shows a strong acknowledgement of moving towards some power shifts in relationships with the stakeholders. Over the past year, much time has been dedicated to nourishing the relationships with the supply chain. Various drivers have determined these political changes. One motivator within the context has been the realisation that there are complex social issues in which the VSOs can play a critical role. Therefore, nourishing these relationships and bringing more trust or legitimacy to the council's actions seems necessary.

Observational data shows that the actors, in this case, have embarked on an outcome-focused commissioning model, which has at its core co-design and co-production. Therefore, it values people and organisations and the value they can bring to the relationships. In doing that, consultations and co-design workshops have been enabled to set out a more extensive range of essential themes and outcomes that reflect the community's voice and needs. The actors recognise the need to consider the community more and value it as an asset. The suppliers and their access to the disadvantaged categories of people are a resource that needs to be treasured. This model emerges as an asset-aware commissioning model (Hunter, 2019, p. 12). The social value is intrinsic in the engagement process and the joint working activities that function between the local contracting authority and the VSOs. This model recognises that social value is about the local value.

5.5.3 Implementation of social value

The relationship is also associated with the power-dependence relations between the local contracting authority (incumbent) and the provider of services (challenger). At the level of bidding for a contract, the tight control and strict requirements might encourage some providers to use specific wording for their achievements to articulate and evidence social value to satisfy the commissioner's expectations. During the service delivery, the power differences are high, and the VSO might conform or not with the requirements. It might be because sometimes, the enforceable expectations of commissioners are unrealistic and cannot change the way of delivery to accommodate these requirements. In such circumstances, some VSOs might raise their voice in favour of being non-conformist about it.

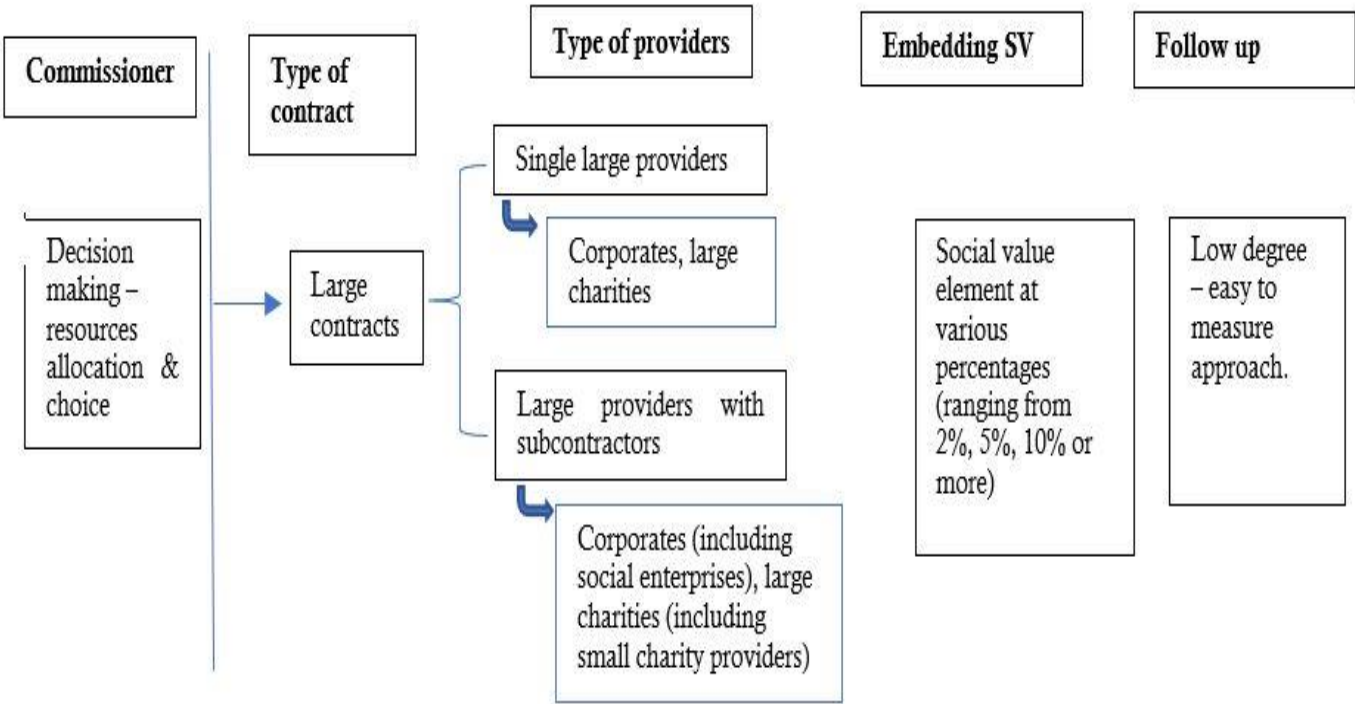
The VSOs, who comply with a contract that embeds an element of social value, are accountable to the local authorities and seek to conform to the regulations and practices imposed by the commissioners, especially in terms of reporting on social value. In Case C, the project manager was aware of the requirements imposed by the local contracting authority. However, he emphasised that what mattered to him was the core part of the service, specifically focusing on the wellbeing of the young children. He noted how they were ethically accountable to the families. Following that came the legal commitments to the local contracting authority. If something was requested by the local contracting authority that might negatively affect the beneficiaries, he would take their independent stand in raising the issue, and they do not perform that requirement. He recognised the importance of the subjective element of their social mission. Their social values should always be respected regardless of the situation. However, this is just one case. It is insufficient to generalise and recommend such an approach to all the charities under the pressure of contract regulations with the local contracting authority.

The reporting style of the outcomes and social value in Case B was instrumental as the local contracting authority needed to demonstrate the targets achieved during the contract's life cycle. Consequently, the reporting style mainly was concerned with percentages and numbers used to describe them reaching the goals. During the contract management, the process was essential, meaning that the activities of service delivery and procedures followed were paramount in evidencing the achievements of the contract. It put forward the number of activities achieved and services offered as a parameter of assessing the quality and performance of the service delivered. The VSO was required to report on targets on the activities, the volunteers who were engaged, and the families and young children who received the service. The reporting of evidence requested by the local contracting authority has been demanded in terms of service quality and some questions concerning social value. In principle, the VSO project manager provides evidence in numerical data regarding those achievements. The project manager's understanding of the social value aspects and its operationalisation in the contract should prove this value with easy-to-measure elements. So far, the focus has been on evidencing the number of volunteers and donations received on the side of the corporates associated with the charity annually. Usually, the charity gets material donations in terms of gifts during the main festivals of the year. Also, the corporates commit some of their staff to volunteer with the charity. As required by the contract, in terms of service quality and improvement over each reporting term, the team prepares schematic case studies with individual cases during the delivery of the project. In principle, the charity conforms or complies with what the local contracting authority asks them to evidence during the quarterly reporting.

Based on the observational data and the informal conversations, evidence and monitoring of their activities and programmes for the young children and their families are laborious. It is not easy also due to the limited resources at their disposal, which are offered under the contract, and the fact that they do not have additional resources to invest. The organizations push forward social value, but there are limitations due to a lack of organisational commitment or the capability to manage it (Roberts, 2019).

The following figure (Figure 5.2) outlines and summarises the insights at the procurement stage with contracting projects embedding social value. At the procurement stage, the decision making in awarding a contract depends on the local contracting authority commissioner. Large contracts mostly dominate the market of commissioning for social value contracts. The primary type of providers able to deliver this type of contract is primarily the large corporates, especially in construction projects. In the space of the voluntary sector, the large charities increased their expertise to handle these types of contracts. Usually, the contracts of commissioning for social value include a percentage of social value element in the scoring evaluation of the contract. It usually ranges from around 5% to 10%, primarily dependent on the service and commissioners. The focus on the articulation and evidencing of social value is predominately centred on the easy to measure indicators (e.g. job training). The follow-up on the commissioned contract is happening to a limited degree depending on commissioners.

Figure 5.2 Approach - Commissioning for social value – procurement stage



Source: Researcher elaboration

6 Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the present study and its contribution to the policy debate about commissioning for social value. It highlights the limitations of the research as well as potential avenues for further investigation. The past decades have witnessed changes in policies governing the provision of services in the UK and consequently changes in the relationships between local authorities and voluntary sector organisations (VSOs), mainly evident in the contracting relationships. The government actively encouraged and supported the VSOs in providing services as part of neo-liberal policies and NPM reforms. The government sought to reduce their role in the direct provision of social services. At the same time, the VSOs takes the part of a buffer between the government and citizens, being directly involved in negotiations for service provision (Schmid, 2013). Concomitantly, the governance for outcome and accountability for results through commissioning contracting frameworks put the VSOs, especially the small VSOs, under pressure to demonstrate their value and distinguish themselves from the competition. Specific policy enacted in their support (Social Value Act 2012) raised awareness for a change of mindset in doing commissioning, putting at its core debate –the ‘social (outcomes) value’ – and by valuing the - ‘interaction’- with the VSOs providers to deliver the policy objectives and social impact. The policy does not set prescriptive obligations for the local authorities to embed it, which raises barriers with its implementation (Courtney, 2018, p. 542) in terms of its application.

For this study, the analysis draws on a commissioning for outcomes approach (Dickinson, 2015), valuing a citizen-centred approach and meaningful interaction between the commissioners, providers and communities. This paper examines the commissioning strategy with social value by exploring the working relationships of commissioners and VSOs, focusing on how they engage in making meaning of social value into the service specifications and co-design services that envisage outcomes for contracts implementation. For the scope of this study, the Strategic Action Field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011) is used as an insightful theory to understand the actors’ positions and actions in the commissioning field of social value and their working relationships. It unpacks the commissioning working relationships to understanding the drivers for change and stability. The key to the commissioning model is engagement– which requires social skills -using tactics such as interpreting, framing and bridging- to embrace the change that improves processes and outcomes in the commissioning process. The commissioning field of social value is a practice-led area, and it is context-specific. The evidence shows a complex field with varied competing interests and low investment in engagement with the providers. The traditional top-down control on the commissioning process is

preferred, instead of innovative mechanisms (i.e., co-design), because that means changing behaviour and sharing power with the providers to do things differently. Currently, the small-medium voluntary organisations are hardly shaping the commissioning market for social value.

The study followed a qualitative methodological stance by exploring the “way how the people make meaning” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 35) and the “holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4) while using a case study (Yin, 2009) methodological approach into the commissioning and procurement practices. The techniques of data collection used were semi-structured interviews and participant observation in three England local authorities.

Thus, the present study has conducted an exploratory and interpretative analysis of the UK’s commissioning process for public services. The study focused on the relations between local contracting authorities and VSOs, focusing on how front-line workers understand and implement SVA policy. The approach followed in this study views the commissioning process as a managerial tool and mechanism for negotiating between local contracting authorities and the supply chain in the market of public service provision. The supply chain is comprised of organisations competing to deliver services that contain varying social value propositions.

Under SAF theory, this study’s analysis was conducted at the level of the commissioning process. The primary analysis focused on the relationships and interactions between front-line workers in the local contracting authorities and the VSOs. In particular, the study examined how front-line workers frame and implement social value in their planning and delivery of public services.

Implementing a new policy around commissioning requires time and understanding, but little is known about the challenges faced by the front-line workers who are tasked with implementing it. A theoretical framework is thus deployed in this study to understand how social value is implemented in the commissioning process. While analysing complex systems, Sandfort and Moulton (2015, p. 68) found it helpful to “view implementation from the perspective of multiple levels, bringing essential parts of the system into focus,” inasmuch as they are intimately connected one to another. The authors highlight how “activities and constraints in the policy field ripple down and affect the organisation and front lines” and argue that analysing policy implementation requires “particular emphasis on the intervention or core program.”

The study’s analytical framework is based on a number of key concepts. The *framing* of the policy refers to how the policy is turned into action. The *embedding* of the policy refers to how it is situated in the process of implementation. The analysis starts from the premise that the local context and the organisational

environment where the action takes place shape the judgements that key actors make in the field. These conditions influence the policy outcomes. As Lipsky (1980, p. 25) observed, it is essential to develop an “understanding of the working conditions and priorities of those who deliver policy and the limits constraining their job.” Therefore, it is assumed in this study that social, economic, environmental, and political conditions at the local level affect the understanding of the SVA.

This study adopted some essential conceptual distinctions concerning social value from both policy documents in the voluntary sector and the literature on public management. Key documents from VSOs were analysed for information regarding current organizational practices, including commissioning practices. Analysis of the academic literature and relevant documents were later supplemented by semi-structured interviews conducted with members of voluntary organisations and local contracting authorities, along with consultants and think tank practitioners involved in the commissioning process. Taken together, the documentary analysis and interview data underscore the difficulty of articulating social value in the commissioning process. The research methodology used three case studies, drawing upon a mixture of interviews, observation, and documentary analysis, ultimately displaying a level of commitment to implementing the SVA in the commissioning process. Based on this range of empirical evidence, the study draws a set of conclusions about the framing and implementation of social value in commissioning.

Conceptually, the study emphasizes the importance of the commissioning cycle, rather than just procurement, and its role in creating social value. It focuses mainly on recognising the significance of engaging service providers in planning services, particularly decision-making. Though many commissioners regard such an approach as controversial and risky, others see it as empowering service providers, both intellectually and operationally, to make informed decisions about the market while articulating their social value.

At the conceptual level, the study deploys a holistic theoretical framework to position the concept of social value in the commissioning process and link it to the main elements that influence its implementation. The critical contribution of this study is to explore the interactional dynamics between the local contracting authorities and VSOs and frame social value in the commissioning process of service provision. It uses SAF theory to analyse the contentious co-construction of social value in the commissioning process. The empirical data support an emerging approach that stresses greater openness and collaboration with service providers (see case study B).

The empirical evidence from the fieldwork shows that the realization of genuine social value depends upon working with the local community to make sure that proposed services are aligned with the needs of its members. Thus, the study’s findings underscore the need to understand social value relationally and

determine its meaning locally. This perspective supports the idea that social value is about measuring predetermined outcomes and the process by which the outcomes are reached.

6.1.1 The scientific literature on social value and VSOs

The scientific literature on social value and VSOs has already generated a number of important insights. The literature establishes the importance of both contractual relationships and reform narratives. It also documents how shifts in the debate on the role of VSOs in service provision brought them to the core of public services. Moreover, the findings emphasise the subjective nature of social value (Barman, 2016; Young, 2006), its contextual nature, and its openness to contestation and reappraisal. The literature attests to the absence of any formal legal definition of social value in public policy, as well as no fulfilment obligations for the local authorities to embed social value in their services or to consider VSOs as being service providers. The policy definition of social value is vague and poorly understood, but local contracting authorities and VSOs nevertheless use it. This study further supports the view that although there is presently no recognised definition of social value, there are some consistent approaches to understanding the concept in the commissioning process. This study underscores the importance of unpacking the concept to develop a genuine understanding of the social value in the local context.

The literature shows that social value is usually discussed in terms of the positive or negative effects that an organization—whether a VSO, a social enterprise, or some other type of organization—has on the community through their operational activities. Generally speaking, social value is about outcomes (Westall, 2009), and these outcomes must be supported by evidence to make sense of the impact created. Therefore, at the organisational level, social value is about the product of purposive social activities (processes) and their consequences, translated either into impact (i.e., the short-term results of the activities) or outcomes (i.e., the overall results in the long term).

In both the academic and policy literature, VSOs are understood as operating as either individual organisations with a social mission or service providers in a funder–supplier relationship. The findings show that any type of organisation can deliver social value. However, each type delivers it differently. The delivery of social value depends on an organisation’s values and the end objective of its operational activities. From the organisational perspective of a VSO, the creation of social value is a given. It is central to the organisation’s social mission. These types of organisations are guided by beliefs and values adopted in a

discretionary way to help society. The existence of such organisations is meaningful because of the social need they address, and their activities create various forms of social benefits.

From a funder's strategic perspective, local contracting authorities act to satisfy collective preferences in a community. Driven by various contextual factors (e.g., austerity, funding cuts, increased social needs), their perspective has been highly instrumental regarding the SVA. It has been seen as a tool to achieve cost savings in delivering services and long-term benefits in the communities they serve.

SVA aimed to produce a shift in commissioning, seeking to focus to non-financial, social considerations that service can bring (e.g., well-being, equality, fairness). The approach is only slowly gaining ground, with many critics claiming that the process is overburdened by extensive monetisation (Mook et al., 2015, p. 242).

From a strategic point of view, the SVA policy aims to make service providers' actions and organisational behaviours more accountable through achieving specific outcomes. However, the outcomes so far have been predominantly considered from a narrow economic perspective rather than a broader social-value-added perspective, as the policy was initially intended. Therefore, charged with demonstrating social value, organisations are compelled to think about how they deliver their services and their benefits to the community. Furthermore, social value is supposed to be strictly linked to organisational motivations and decision-making to provide evidence of the benefits of their services. As part of the willingness of organizations to work within the market, the SVA could be used as a tool to achieve strategic instrumental goals.

6.1.2 Social value policy and change

The policy of social value (SVA) encourages people to think differently about judging the value of a service. It is not something new, having existed before the SVA formally introduced it. The policy's broad definition of social value offers flexibility in approaching it while generating uncertainty about how to understand and measure it.

SVA is a policy mechanism that enables actors to think and do things differently during the commissioning process. Embedding social value is often seen as a strategic means to achieve desired ends. In the commissioning process, social value can create change and make a difference in people's lives.

Change primarily occurs at two levels:

- 1) Social value broadens the focus from achieving narrow outcomes to longer-term sustainability to delivering services to local communities.
- 2) The new perspective prompts actors to change the way they manage the commissioning process. Participants are encouraged to implement the process carefully, and new importance is given to the pre-commissioning stage and interactions with the supply chain.

The managerial discourse of SVA requires organisations to be accountable for social, environmental and economic outcomes. It also shapes the market during the commissioning and tendering process and sets the parameters for better decision making while favouring organisational efficiency and performance (e.g., outcome measurement, payment by results).

Due to economic stagnation and reduced budgets, the SVA policy objectives are currently not achievable. The new policy priorities may have barely been internalised by the front-line workers, who are already under pressure when performing their commissioning duties. The structural implications of the policy allow them to apply it neutrally (e.g., specifying its existence in service design tenders). Thus, these workers comply with the policy without genuinely pursuing social value throughout the lifetime of a project.

In terms of mandated action, the policy requires both pre-procurement considerations and consultations. This specification underscores that social value is meant to be considered during procurement activities and when creating the service design itself. A fundamental aspect of the policy is how it encourages actors to plan how they will embed social value during the preliminary stages of commissioning (i.e., the pre-commissioning process). The policy does not specify when the consultation is appropriate, but it does say that social value is a consideration in pre-procurement activities. That said, the consideration of consultation on service specification and design with social value is often postponed until the stage of tendering a contract.

In order to embed social value in the commissioning process, the commissioners' judgement is necessary, especially at the point of awarding a contract:

- 1) Judgement might be strongly influenced by the organizations' instrumental-utilitarian goals that usually is predominant in decision-making.
- 2) Judgement aims at balancing social and economic value. To meaningfully balance both forms of value, a clear understanding of the social value and its effect on various stakeholders is necessary. Social value cannot be understood in isolation from its beneficiaries. Therefore, it must be designed to consider both the people affected by the services and the people who deliver them. Economic concerns dominate the mainstream

approach to commissioning for SVA. Due to various socio-economic conditions, including budgets cuts, managers of the commissioning process typically focus on large contracts and low-price delivery of services. Economic cutbacks to local authorities pose the main challenge for those who participate in commissioning for public services. Political tensions and insufficient resources for effective local community governance pose additional challenges.

3) The judgement of social value is context-dependent to the local community and required services. Local conditions influence it. An informed judgement based on knowledge of social needs can be made at the pre-commissioning stage. Moreover, it can support the knowledge and learning needed to articulate the social value of a service or service at the community level.

Despite these current challenges, some exciting new initiatives aim to improve public services. The way front-line workers in local contracting authorities decide the quality of the services and their provisions has changed, as has the way that the commissioning process contributes to the provision of services. However, the new changes are not easily embedded in local practices and are sometimes seen as substantial shifts into the technocratic approach that has dominated commissioning practices so far.

6.1.3 Challenges in framing social value

Policy implementation (SVA) is unpredictable at the local level, and compliance with the national policy is sketchy. While SVA has gained popularity at the level of the local contracting authority, it has done so unevenly. Social value remains inadequately understood among the providers and suppliers of publicly commissioned services, and an innovative framework is needed to develop a shared understanding of the concept. Defining and measuring social value in light of the SVA remains among the main issues on the agenda.

Developing a shared understanding of social value can be difficult as the concept means different things in different contexts. Although there is a growing understanding of what social value means, there is a persistent gap between articulation and implementation. The interpretations vary when examining practices. Some interpretations of social value merely repeat the policy language; some highlight a shift in strategic thinking; and some demonstrate a more holistic understanding, focusing on outcomes and broad community benefits.

Approaches to determining social value are driven by:

- Evidence of outcomes – using performance management tools to assess social value impacts.
- More ‘relational’ considerations – ‘understanding needs and social value’ through approaches that emphasise co-design and co-production.

The following contextual conditions might shape how policy is framed:

- Framing under urgency and regarding the SVA merely in terms of compliance.
- Aligning the policy with a creative endeavour. Framing the SVA policy as providing an opportunity to innovate locally.

Social value can be framed as either an outcome or a process. The intentions of the actors shape the way they frame social value. When the social value is framed in terms of results, the focus is on measuring social impact and social outcomes. When framed in terms of (social, economic and environmental) outcomes, the focus is on an intervention’s intended and unintended consequences, viewed holistically and with a long-term perspective. The focus is often a matter of measuring monetary value. The anticipated audit at the organisational level puts pressure on the development of measurement tools to assess the social value of the services. In commissioning for outcomes, the focus has primarily been put on performance measurement and results.

When framed as a process, social value induces methodologic strategic thinking on the value created by commissioning in the overall cycle and focuses on outcomes created for all stakeholders for a particular service or service providers and the public. It requires a coordinated approach to the commissioning cycle.

The study considers the overall commissioning cycle and its various tasks as essential. A coordinated approach throughout the commissioning cycle, with social value at its core, requires reinforcing a relational approach in commissioning, which entails collaboration in deciding, designing, delivering and evidencing services that maximize social value.

Commissioning does not happen in isolation. It is appropriately seen as an investment mechanism and strategy that involves various actors in delivering services. The main actors who sign the contractual agreement are the commissioners and the suppliers. The way social value is framed at the procurement stage depends on the institutional rationales of the actors involved in the process. The actors’ social skills influence the overall approach towards framing and implementing social value, both on the demand and supplier sides. It can invite an overall strategic collective action in the commissioning process or might be treated at the contracted-only service level.

If these actors have a genuine understanding of social value from the start, they are more likely to embed it in the services they design and transmit it to the recipients of those services. Thus, learning plays an essential role in the process. If the primary actors in commissioning understand recipients' needs and design their approach accordingly, there can be genuine interaction between the actors and meaningful benefits for everyone involved. It would constitute a coordinated, collaborative approach to doing things differently about commissioning with social value.

When commissioning is framed as a process, it generates a coordinated strategic approach that involves a strategically formulated methodology centred on a) instrumental policy achievements measured in monetary terms; b) overall benefits to the community; and c) the suppliers. Economic value is still essential in the discourse surrounding this process, but there is also a consideration of how to bring 'value to society' through building meaningful relationships.

The commissioning process is technocratic and has complex strict rules, is expensive, and is time-consuming. Bringing it to completion raises another critical issue: creating social value that is meaningful in the long run. Commissioning for social value underscores the need to pay attention to interactions and relationships in the field. Having the proper strategic orientation to learn from these interactions is crucial.

Therefore, there is a need to recalibrate the focus. More than ever before, there is currently a need to strengthen the link between society and the local authorities, and social value does precisely that. Social value can be the object of the results-oriented action that governments demand, bringing a more aligned societal approach to public action.

A process-based perspective or '*system approach*' (Raiden et al., 2019, p. 7) with respect to social value provides a tool for understanding the many components and interactions that comprise the whole social value creation system. Within such a system, engagement and stakeholders comprise core features that enable social value creation. Understanding how the providers deliver services with more careful consideration of the value they can bring to the service is essential. In addition, exploring their more unique and innovative solutions carefully and how their operational activities bring value to the system changes the discourses on how the contract of social value is awarded. The value and benefits might be mostly intangible, not immediately measurable, such as greater community cohesion and engagement (Boeger, 2017, p. 114), but giving meaning to such elements through qualitative measures might be of great significance to the service.

The policy noted the instrument of consultation in its test to be used upon consideration by the commissioners. Such specification allows linking the mechanism of engagement throughout the

commissioning process, especially with the pre-commissioning stage. The element of engagement appeals to the democratic value of participation at various levels and stages of the commissioning process.

Setting an understanding of the concept of social value through the SVA policy lens from the early stages of the commissioning process is essential. Such an approach can address the gap in knowledge around the concept on the demand and supply side of the commissioning process. Learning and educating each other on the needs and priorities that the services can address to respond to beneficiaries needs and have a better beneficial impact on the overall community can be highly insightful to the overall process. It can be beneficial for the actors involved in the process. The entire commissioning field might progressively move and align to a shared understanding of the social value and how to respond to the requirements more appropriately.

Acting under the democratic dimension of the service is a need. As per such a perspective, the meaning of social value for service under procurement should be constructed at the pre-procurement stage, using various participatory institutional arrangements to reach a consensus regarding the service design agenda and the outcomes to be pursued.

In the commissioning cycle, the meaning of social value should be contextualised locally through a democratic process involving the recipients of the services, main stakeholders, local authorities and the suppliers (e.g., VSOs). Social value should be embedded in the design for how services will be delivered. Therefore, this study proposes further attention to how commissioning social value is implemented. It encourages engagement mechanisms to reach a more genuine understanding and operationalisation of social value with the participant stakeholders (including providers) affected by the contracted services.

The commissioning process can help us understand how social value is created and how implementation can be disrupted. The central tensions outlined in the study are linked to how social value is taken up, interpreted and framed by the front-line workers of both the local contracting authorities and the voluntary sector suppliers. This study outlines the role of these actors in co-constructing social value while also analysing the drivers of stability and change that influence implementation and the role of VSOs' in shaping the market. A central learning point is a gap in knowledge with the concept on both sides, affecting the commissioning for social value-effective implementation. Creating a field that emerges progressively towards shared understanding and shared learning among those actors might benefit the commissioning process.

The social value policy encourages actors to redesign public services, taking into account the communities served. Such an aim requires a new way of thinking. Local authorities and voluntary and private sector organisations must rethink their role in society and how they can improve their operational impact in economic, social, and environmental terms.

Along with the SVA, it is critical to emphasise the importance of following an integrated commissioning model. Such a model focuses attention on the community's needs in a more concrete way and connects local authorities to society. Moreover, it puts the citizen at the centre of the decision-making, leading to genuine benefits for the community. It is not just a matter of serving citizens but also of engaging with them when planning how the services will be delivered. In sum, it is a matter of understanding the community's needs and using this information to design genuine social value into the services.

The findings from the fieldwork make clear the significance of the organisational identities' agency and efficacy, along with their engagement in commissioning. Their understanding of the narrative of social value and social policy shaping the commissioning field was also essential, and the power dynamics and the effort to collaborate in framing and developing common objectives. Moreover, the main actors recognised the contextual factors influencing how they understood and implemented the policy.

The study findings show that the introduction of social value occurs mainly at the procurement stage of the commissioning process.

- i) At this stage, front-line workers have their understandings of social value. Their beliefs are shaped by both their organisational identities and institutional instrumental goals in contracting a particular service. This approach is predominant in commissioning for social value and applies to individual contracted services. At this stage, service providers are required to come with their social value propositions. The most convincing providers, who give the lowest cost to deliver the services, often win the contract.
- ii) Other approaches are based on a more holistic, coordinated approach or systematic approach. The focus here is on collaboration and social value creation within the commissioning process itself. Such an approach emphasises relationships and the people and providers who will be affected by the services delivered.

The empirical evidence shows that the context and initial local conditions matter. The conditions present at the onset of the commissioning process can either facilitate or discourage the consideration of social value at any stage. Furthermore, these starting conditions can influence how relational working might shape the services and assist in implementing social value. The research emphasizes the importance of the primary actors' social skills, which enables a relational approach framing in the early stages of commissioning and a shared understanding of how social value can be activated through interactions.

There is a recognition of the significance of local context in shaping the understanding of social value, as each place has its specific needs and priorities. The essential actors (incumbents) commitment to improving relationships and shaping a shared understanding of the outcomes through participatory mechanisms is crucial.

The research findings indicate that neither commissioners nor providers ever fully understand the policy and concept of social value. Developing such an understanding is a work in progress, and each organisation makes sense of the concept and policy within its specific context. In the current context of economic austerity, some commissioners regard social value as an opportunity to address the community's needs differently.

Overall the experiences with commissioning social value are fragmentary and diverse. Some local contracting authorities take a more collaborative approach in their relations with service providers and the community. Nevertheless, among local contracting authorities, more traditionalist and risk-averse commissioning teams accentuate the competition while using tendering for contracts to improve quality and economic value. In either of the below approaches, the competition always remains a core function of the procurement and commissioning process. However, the way how the overall process of commissioning is carried out can make a tremendous difference in creating social value. It can bring learning and insights into the overall commissioning process that could be valuable and supportive for both the demand and supply side of the contracted service. The medium and small VSOs providers might increasingly benefit from their inclusion in this market and recognize the valuable local intelligence they carry through their activities in the local communities.

The data show that the more collaborative approach is driven by the need to transform council strategies in order to reach the community. One of the cases presented in this study documents efforts to embrace a more transformational approach that regards the community as a local asset with a valuable role in the commissioning process. In this case, collaboration in the commissioning process along with a social value policy became a priority.

As a final note, it can be said that in the spirit of good commissioning, the social value policy encourages the use of engagement mechanisms both with the service providers and other stakeholders. Such a process supports articulating mutually beneficial goals that provide standards for judging the outcomes of commissioning contracts. The local contracting authority, service providers, voluntary sector organisations, and the community work together to visibly understand and shape their needs, priorities, and outcomes in alignment with social value in a specific local context.

6.1.4 Implementation dynamics and social value in the commissioning process

At the local level, contracting authorities are developing procedures for procuring and delivering goods embedded with social value. The approach to social value has slowly developed through broadening the definition of *economic value* to incorporate more comprehensive social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits (Raiden et al., 2019, p. 10). However, it has been observed in various places that the primacy placed by the front-line workers on securing cost-saving contracts undermines the pursuit of social value. In the broad spectrum of activities that the commissioning and tendering process entails, the social value remains a small part of the decision-making criteria, joining other considerations including price, performance and quality.

A growing emphasis on outcomes characterizes current debates in the field of contracting and commissioning. The focus has shifted from inputs and outputs to outcomes with the SVA discourse. The objective is to deliver social value outcomes in terms of economic, social, and environmental benefits. In the language of contracts, there has been a similar shift away from measuring targets to discussing outcomes and social value-driven performance contracts. The crucial question in evaluating a service organisation's social value proposition in the bidding process is *how* it will achieve its aim.

The policy adds a layer of accountability by requiring the social value of a particular service to be measurable. While measurable results continue to matter, the economic, social and environmental benefits viewed more comprehensively matter as well.

Even when the term 'social value' is not clearly defined in the policy, it is understood to connote a holistic way of thinking about services exceeding just the cost of the service. However, data about local practice shows that the instrumental goal of reducing the cost of services remains a primary concern for many contracting

authorities. Local contexts are often characterized by economic pressures such as austerity and budgets cuts that influence the approach to SVA and how social value is weighted in contracting services.

The implementation of the policy often focuses on individual contractual services.

Meanwhile, a more committed approach to the SVA emerges, where social value becomes a core function and priority is given to the regulation of the system of commissioning and the procurement process. Some local contracting authorities have outlined their own personalised social value policy that regulates and recognise their commitment to social value throughout their entire commissioning process. It requires a committed and coordinated approach to working with suppliers, citizens and relevant stakeholders, one that makes cooperation between different actors a priority. Moreover, in this process, a different approach to SVA is undertaken. More attention is also given to the skills required of the commissioners and voluntary sectors engaged in this process (case B in this study). Therefore, it is not just a particular industry or a specific individual service that gives X weighting to social value. However, it is part of a coordinated effort, where co-production and engagement become a core function of the procurement and commissioning practices. Along with such an approach, the local value of such mechanisms is emphasised.

There is no model for how to commission for social value due to there being neither a shared understanding of what it means nor procedures for creating it. Because local contracting authorities and suppliers still have a weak understanding of the process, and because each local context requires specific outcomes, interaction is essential for the learning process. At the very least, the front-line workers of the local contracting authority should have the requisite social skills to manage the process successfully through implementation. Whether for the delivery of services or the development of a framework for outcomes to guide the process, the front-line workers and the suppliers should cooperate effectively.

The procurement regulations dictate that the social value element embedded in contracts should attain a certain threshold. However, case evidence, policy advice, and best practice recommendations support the view that the social value should also be considered below the threshold across the entire procurement process.

There is an ongoing debate on how social value should be embedded in contracts and what scoring criteria should be used. There is no formal policy criterion for determining social value, and scoring depends on the commissioner's understanding and measurement. When the policy does not demand including social value, the commissioner has the power to embed it or not in the contract. It disincentivizes embedding social value because it subsequently requires following up on its implementation and measuring its outcomes.

Thus, a weak commitment to embedding social value in procurement practices has been observed, as commissioners have a poor ability to understand and measure it. Similarly, the data show that the commissioners might score social value in some local contexts—if they consider it at all—2%, 5% or 10% at the level of the particular projects awarded. There are many differences between local contracting authorities, including multiple degrees of compliance with the law. In some situations, the local contracting authorities that have incorporated social value statements in their commissioning framework have given notably higher social value scores, ranging from 10% upwards. However, the concrete situation always depends on the commissioners, contract type, and the services provided. The evidence shows that in many cases, best practices point towards the positive difference that social value makes to the services and how social value produces cost-saving in the long term.

Although there is currently no social value policy in place (see case studies A and C) and no set scale for scoring it in the specification of services, the commissioners generally recognise that, where feasible, they should check a given service for it. When the social service requires such consideration, specific social value questions need to be addressed to the suppliers. Once embedded in the contract, the commissioners take responsibility for scoring the service's social value and ensuring its targets are achieved. The supplier is also under pressure to find strategies and methods for generating and evidencing social value. Often, commissioners ask questions and score social value at the time of tendering. However, after the contract has been awarded, there is frequently no follow-up concerning its implementation (i.e., delivery, monitoring and reporting).

The data gathered in case study B outline how, under the auspices of the policy, the commissioning team works more effectively to deliver social value through co-production. These trends show that virtual engagement is an essential factor throughout the process. Such engagement enables a relational dynamic to develop between a procurer and a supplier (and its beneficiaries), thus ensuring the policy requirements. This debate stimulates discussion and innovation among local contracting authorities. Findings from council meeting conferences and data from interviews converge to emphasise the need for local authorities to consider social outcomes.

Despite efforts at reform, many local commissioning authorities remain uncertain about understanding and implementing social value. This research shows that the policy has generally been positively perceived. However, there is an absence of leaders willing to make it the core function of the commissioning and procurement process. Despite these reform efforts, to a certain extent, the price of the contracts continues to

be the top priority in decision-making rather than embedding social value throughout the contract and working to implement it.

The empirical data also demonstrate that the decision to embed social value (i.e., finance and integrate it) and account for it through the commissioning and procurement processes significantly depends on the political agenda of the local contracting authority. Some local authorities choose to formalise a social value policy that includes social value charters and toolkits. Such a policy makes their commitment to embedding social value in their procurement practices in alignment with a constant minimum score official. However, the research findings also show opposing trends, especially from the supply side, raising questions about the efficacy of social value and whether it is a core function of the procurement process or merely a box-ticking exercise. Some commentators argue that the low scoring on social value (i.e., 2%, 5% or 10%) in the contracts does not make it attractive to VSOs in bidding on such contracts, so it is not worth the time investment.

When the social value is not understood, the SVA has probably not been considered in the commissioning and procurement process. Understanding SVA at the outset would likely also influence the degree to which the commissioners score for it in the contract. When there is no understanding of social value, the scoring is predictably very low. It is essential to recognize that scoring social value means monitoring and measuring it throughout the contract's life cycle. Monitoring and measuring social value are critical stages in the commissioning cycle.

A contracting authority's commissioning approach to delivering social services often depends on the local community's issues (e.g., social, economic, and environmental). Due to the non-prescriptive nature of the policy, each local contracting authority approach is based on its priorities. Some contracting authorities have developed good local practices. Some commit to the policy to reflect a political agenda regarding the commissioning process as an opportunity to address social, environmental and economic issues and spur local growth. There have been concerted efforts to create social value for the community in advance of any legislation in some places.

The research data show that those local authorities which have already delivered social value projects are the ones that have been most adaptive and innovative in implementing the policy. Social value implementation is seen as an opportunity to improve the commissioning process within these local contexts. Meanwhile, other localities have chosen to implement the policy because the national legislation required it, though not prescriptive.

Concerning service delivery, the research findings show that commissioners tend to be more interested in monitoring whether project targets have been reached than enhancing social value. Commissioners often focus on outputs and quantitative measures as evidence of results.

6.1.5 Commissioning for social value and VSOs

Case studies A and C show that the VSO sector is largely excluded from the commissioning process, and there has been relatively little investment in developing relationships with it. At the same time, the VSO sector's potential to contribute valuable knowledge about a community's needs and effectively deliver services has been recognised.

However, there are always competing priorities, which depend on multiple factors. The agenda is influenced by various local authority contexts and social-economic and political conditions, their instrumental strategic goals and their relationships with the VSOs. The dynamic position of VSOs in the local community and their relationship with the local contracting authority matter very much (Case B in this study).

The importance of investing in VSOs to build their capacity to deliver projects with social value embedded in them is widely recognized. If they do not get resources to improve their ability and accountability, they will remain in the same place. Some have managed to survive, while others have disappeared.

In case studies A and C, contracts have substituted grants, while case study B was in transition to contracting at the research. This latter case illustrates the amount of effort put into sustaining VSOs throughout this process. Beyond this, there has been growing awareness that the sector needs more financial help to shift to the commissioning culture. The local authority has adopted a hybrid commissioning model, informed by a continuous, thorough co-production process with VSOs. It builds on the premise that the smoother the transition for these organisations will be with such an approach.

Case studies A and C data show that the local contracted authority embraced a clear position towards VSOs, as they did not have any more grants due to the budget cuts. Thus, they invested more in the local contracting authority's expertise to understand the community's needs rather than collaborating with VSOs in the commissioning process. In the case of study B, by contrast, the local contracting authority, which has benefited from subsidies over recent years, still managed to distribute grants to the voluntary sector for a limited period, while the contracting and SVA was applied mainly to planning and local infrastructure

projects. Thus, the focus was mainly on large contracts. There has also been intensive work to sustain the VSOs' transition to a contracting culture for outcomes and co-production. Such an approach demonstrates an awareness of the potential of VSOs to sustain local services. The work involved investing essential resources in helping this sector in transition. However, such approaches vary significantly from place to place, making it difficult to compare them.

The opportunities for VSOs to participate in service design specifications are limited. Those who participate in the commissioning process need to publicise the information on the local contracting authority website and have the expertise to digest it. Participation always requires having sufficient information. The fact is that VSOs are often not well enough informed about the procedures. However, there are generally differences in the views of the VSOs and local contracting authorities. For instance, in the case of study A, the front-line workers of the local contracting authority believed that VSOs were receiving information when the procurement calls and projects were made public. At the same time, representatives of the VSO claimed that they were being given insufficient information. The attitudes and beliefs of front-line workers sometimes contradict those of VSO representatives. The convergence between the sectors interests and expectations might not be easy.

There have also been problems in how commissioning services are carried out (similar, perhaps, to problems in the social and health services regarding community engagement). However, front-line workers typically do not recognise these problems. It is predominantly the organisational, political logic of the local contracting authority that drives organisational performance at both the policy and public service provision level. Internal expertise, data on social progress, and assessments guide the public action of local contracting authorities. While for VSOs, engagement might be essential to understand how to win commissioning contracts, the local contracting authority might use participatory mechanisms only for particular services. The same applies to the development of a local social value policy.

In some places, the style of engagement of a local authority's participation team working with VSO representatives to deliver a strategy for the sector needs improvement. If the local contracting authority's structures and modes of action do not make space for the VSOs, then their participation remains nominal. Many local VSOs have lost their public service contracts. Some VSOs have failed to update their organisational cultures to respond to the new competitive environment of contracting. It applies to all the analysed studies but is seen in studies A and C data.

VSOs are also facing sector disillusion because they know the local needs and priorities without the possibility of using them. This problem was recognised by local commissioners in case study B when they pointed out

that communities were often engaged in consultations. However, then at the end of the process, nothing was achieved using the data collected. The local contracting authority did not follow up with the community, negatively affecting their relationship with the participants. Sometimes valuable information might be lost, so the commissioners' social skills in managing, nourishing and brokering the relationships are essential.

Various problems arise in the interaction between the front-line workers of local contracting authorities and VSO workers in the commissioning process. The declared aim of the process is to develop a shared understanding of policies and activities as well as consistent messaging in the delivery of a service. It is an essential part of the process to discuss misunderstandings and inappropriate expectations for how social value will be delivered. Some of the reasons for weak engagement have been recognised. For engagement to have an impact, time, resources, and the exchange of information is required. Case study B provides a good example of a local contracting authority taking a long-term perspective to strengthen the relationships. A dynamic co-production process has been adopted, supporting the organisation's overall strategy to improve a good commissioning approach with the stakeholders. It built on it by developing local outcome frameworks and organising workshops and professional training sessions for local service organisations and staff from different commissioning departments.

A shared vision of social value is nevertheless essential. Without such a vision, there can be no effective collaboration. Work goes on in silos, and commissioners often tick the boxes without much reflection on what social value means and how it can be accounted for during the contract's lifecycle. The research findings underscore the need to think beyond the fragmented procurement practices and take a locally situated approach in which local commissioners, VSOs, and the public work together to create a common strategy in the commissioning for services. Instrumental goals should be balanced with social goals for a more expansive vision of the anticipated benefits.

The work of changing traditional pathways and behaviours is immediate. A political drive to create a consensus around a new agenda is always necessary (case B in this study). It is equally essential to get the perspective of front-line workers when implementing a new policy. For VSOs to participate and have influence, they need access to information and a better understanding of how the commissioning process works.

Currently, there is a critical communication gap hobbling the procurement process with social value. Local contracting authorities often do not explain what they want to contract bidders. Meanwhile, the authorities report feeling that bidders do not understand the expectations or what they can contribute. A clear

understanding of the social value expectations and other essential contract elements is therefore essential. Often, during the consultation, the SVA policy is mentioned without sufficient details concerning the expectations. While the necessity of embedding social value at the early stages may be recognized, an understanding of expectations is frequently wanted. Service organizations need more support with this process.

Market testing is essential in the early stages because it generates important conversations about social value. Organizations also need help understanding what the local contracting authorities want and how to respond appropriately. Therefore, it is critical to embrace a relational approach early on to foster a common understanding of the expectations, inevitably leading to better framing and implementation. It is essential to recognize that learning from one another improves the commissioning process overall.

On a final note, it should be recognized that although there is much focus on measuring social value, this is often done by applying different standards. One approach to measuring social value is to focus exclusively on the outcomes. Assessing social value for the services can be challenging. There are standards of measurement (SROI used as reference) that have been developed in the market. Also, the measurement of soft, intangible outcomes (intended and unintended) is not easy. When offering commissioning tenders, VSOs increasingly aim to demonstrate the social value of their activities by using various impact assessment tools. It poses a problem for small-medium voluntary organizations that do not have the time, financial resources, or expertise to do this. As a result, these organizations currently have little impact on the market of commissioning for social value. They often rely on other means of financing their work at the margins of the commissioning contracts market.

Some VSOs have stopped bidding for contracts. They regarded it as a waste of time and resources to apply for such contracts, even if the scoring of social value stood at 10%. Moreover, in many cases, the weighting of social value is too low, primarily when their social mission is entirely based on creating social value. Commissioning contracts frequently impose requirements and constraints beyond the scoring of social value, putting VSOs at a disadvantage from the start compared to corporations.

6.2 Implications of the research

The research has significant implications for the commissioning process actors and the SVA implementation process. It raises awareness about a number of tensions concerning social value implementation in the current commissioning process.

The study presents empirical insights from different locations, though the research results are not generalisable at the regional level. Every local context is different, and every local authority has a unique approach to embedding social value in the commissioning process.

The study shows that social value is an increasingly relevant concern in the process of commissioning services. Over recent years, there has been progress in implementing the policy, with local contracting authorities embracing new practices and approaches to embed social value in their commissioning and procurement procedures. Overall, there is a growing consensus among policymakers, public managers, and voluntary sector organisations that social value matters in the commissioning process.

The SVA underscores the importance of making contracting decisions that positively impact the social, economic, and environmental conditions of the community being served. Moreover, the policy provides a salient reminder of the necessity to listen to the citizens' voices (in both official and unofficial roles) when aligning social needs and project outcomes to create social value for the whole community. Experts do not have access to sufficient information to decide what will meet the constituents' needs. Across the field, there is an increased awareness about the need to align the services with the public's expectations (exchanging ideas and expression of voice). These shifts support a participatory approach (shift in roles and relationships) to designing and delivering services, which underscores the necessity of developing governance arrangements that foster and sustain cross-sector relationships (breaking boundaries) to co-create social value through the commissioning-and procurement process.

This study shows that a good commissioning process consists of tailoring the social value-based service to community needs and engaging with stakeholders to improve service delivery. Such a process values human engagement and the specificities of place. Moreover, thinking about social value from a process perspective has important implications for how commissioners engage with VSOs during the commissioning process. Taking a holistic approach would improve public commissioners and VSOs relationships and promote a better understanding of the social value that could embed it as a core function of the commissioning process.

Finally, the research findings stress the importance of taking a procedural view of stakeholders. Policymakers and practitioners must recognise the fragmentation of service focus, service providers and citizens' interests and work to reintegrate them.

6.3 Contribution of the research

This study aimed to contribute insights about social value in the provision of public services that could inform both the theory and practice of commissioning. The research is interdisciplinary, bringing together a novel range of perspectives. Its main contribution is to the public management and organisation literature, though it will also be of interest to scholars working in voluntary sector studies.

The research speaks to the growing interest in commissioning for social value and understanding the role of the strategic actors who deliver social value in public services. The study's findings will be useful for both local contracting authority commissioners involved in designing service specifications and VSOs working to deliver contracts that embed social value. This study fills a gap in the literature concerning tensions that exist in the implementation process. Moreover, the research provides theoretical insights that will be useful for more effectively embedding social value in the commissioning process.

The study provides a greater understanding of the experiences of the front-line workers who implement the SVA in commissioning for public services. It speaks to a variety of audiences who are interested in the topic. It ranges from the front-line workers engaged in delivering public services in cities across England, the VSO workers who interact with the public sector, VSO managers, and finally civic leaders, all of whom are likely to find value in the study.

The critical contribution of this study is to use SAF theory to conceptualise the collective and contentious dimensions of how social value is framed and implemented in the commissioning process. The study adds to the existing literature by exploring the factors that enable and constrain the integration of the SVA in the commissioning process. The study emphasizes the crucial role of actors' social skills and power dynamics in the process, and it sustains the importance of engagement in commissioning public services. In doing so, the barriers to integrating the SVA policy are brought into relief. Moreover, this research explores and explains the contributions of commissioners in integrating social value into the policy agenda of local authorities. By focusing on the role of front-line workers such as commissioners and project managers in the voluntary sector,

this study aims to provide analysts, practitioners, and local organisations with theoretical and practical knowledge to help them negotiate various challenges and complexities. Therefore, the study offers recommendations about how to embed social value in the commissioning process more effectively.

The process perspective taken in this study focuses on the elements that contribute to the framing and implementation of social value. The commissioning process is conceptualised as a social system that includes the perspectives of multiple actors on the meaning of social value in public services. It highlights how social value is always co-framed by collective organised actors, incumbents, and challengers who have different, often conflicting interests. Moreover, these actors act within fields that are embedded in broader social contexts and environments, including other SAFs, that may spark contentious behaviour between incumbents and challengers in each SAF. Contention may lead to significant change or merely a slight reconfiguration of the field and the actors' positions within it. This study focuses on collective and contentious elements that aim to provide a theoretical framework for rigorous empirical investigation.

Building on this research, there is a need to investigate further the role of the SVA in the construction of social value in the contractual funding relationship. The research findings support the importance of the SVA in providing guidance both at the pre-procurement stage and throughout the commissioning process. In order to construct a shared understanding of the social value in a specific context, certain institutional arrangements and democratic processes of engagement are necessary. Under these conditions, the social value would be linked to a scale of choices, processes, and outcomes in a specific time and place.

The study also contributes a conceptual framework that facilitates a deeper understanding of the full scope of the commissioning process and a greater appreciation of policy achievements with respect to social value. The conceptual framework sheds light on the commissioning process's content, scope, and sequence, including the various dynamics and rationalities structuring the commissioning field.

The study supports the position that the optimal commissioning approach is based on collaboration and democratic engagement strengthened by SVA implementation. From this perspective, there is significant value in the *process* of implementing SVA and realising social value. The process-centred approach involves thinking about social value as part of a broader value creation process for the benefit of all stakeholders. This approach draws on insights from the scientific literature and empirical data about the importance of interaction and engagement in implementing the SVA to produce genuine social value in a local community.

The study focuses on the commissioning tool to underscore the importance of:

- Involving the public as well as providers organisations in defining and understanding social value and (social, economic and environmental) outcomes
- Recognising the full array of assets and resources, as well as the value of equal partnerships and power-sharing
- Placing both local knowledge and market knowledge at the centre of the decision-making
- Emphasising the need for locally coordinated decision-making and resource allocation during procurement and throughout the commissioning process

This conceptual framework has been created to implement a process/systems approach to social value in the commissioning of services. This approach puts a premium on the relational dynamics between stakeholders. Recently, reform trends have witnessed the emergence of collaborative commissioning. Such trends support the view that the SVA plays an essential role in effective commissioning and strengthens its core functions.

By conceptualising commissioning for social value in terms of co-production, the users and providers of services become central. This approach provides commissioners with a new strategic perspective that welcomes the engagement of the public and market providers in the commissioning process.

This thesis argues that social value criteria should be embedded at the pre-procurement stage, not merely at the procurement stage as has been custom for some time. Central to this study claim is that front-line workers need to embrace the practice of co-constructing social value at this early stage.

This study brings a practice-based approach to the literature on SVA implementation in the commissioning process. It makes five critical contributions to the commissioning field of social value:

- i) It highlights the relationships between VSOs and local contracting authorities as well as their perspectives on social value. It identifies the implications of and tensions in the policy. Also, it analyses how organisational identities operate and interact within a context.
- ii) It advances a view of what commissioning for social value is and highlights what is missing from existing processes.
- iii) It contributes to debates regarding tensions within the commissioning process, especially those caused by different interpretations of and approaches to social value and inadequate engagement and communication skills implementation. It raises awareness that there is a need to invest more in actors' social skills to frame, brokering, and successfully manage relationships.

- iv) It maps the array of views concerning the social and competing value perspectives in social value creation, focusing on the voluntary sector, particularly in relation to the literature of social entrepreneurship.
- v) It uses SAF theory to analyse the commissioning process and provides an integrated conceptual framework to foster a critical understanding of its position within the field.

6.4 Strengths and limitations of this study

This qualitative study offers a contextually rich and insightful understanding of diverse views on social value and practices of commissioning in England. It is based on three in-depth studies, though they are not intended to be representative of experiences across all local contexts. Furthermore, the case studies do not reflect best practices in embedding SVA. However, the studies reveal the obstacles and difficulties that front-line workers face when trying to embed social value in the commissioning and procurement of contracts.

This study provides further evidence of SVA policy implementation, as follows:

(i) While the literature reflects the nuanced differences in how local contracting authorities and voluntary organisations view social value, little scholarly work has been done to scrutinise the distinctions when applied to the commissioning process. The present study thus significantly expands and deepens the debate, bringing attention to how social value is constructed in theory and reflected in practice.

(ii) Currently, the front-line workers exercise discretion when considering social value at the procurement stage of awarding a contract. Given the limited knowledge regarding the implementation of the SVA in the overall commissioning process, there is a need to investigate how local commissioning organisations approach embedding social value within the process and how they interact with providers, particularly VSOs. In interpreting the policy, social value has been understood both as an outcome and an approach (Westall, 2012), one that “goes beyond commercial value and individual service outputs” (Boeger, 2017, p. 114).

Here to date, there has been very little research on social value in the full commissioning and procurement processes, and the present study aims to fill that gap. This study highlights how social value is essential from the earliest stages of the commissioning process through the entire commissioning cycle. In particular, the study underscores the importance of the pre-commissioning stage. At this stage, the interaction between the actors generates relational funding. It allows for the co-construction of social value, aligned with conditions of a specific context and the needs of a specific community.

There are indeed some limitations to this approach. For example, conceptualising social value in this way does make it somewhat more challenging to measure. This limitation, however, should be balanced against recognition of how this approach to analysing the commissioning process is certain to foster a more robust understanding of how social value is constructed within the various institutional arrangements.

6.5 Future research

Building off the present work, a still more comprehensive exploration of the subject would produce valuable knowledge. The work was exploratory, and it would be of benefit to progress the research questions further. Beyond the cases examined in this study, other cases might revise the current understanding of best practices. The cases chosen for this study focused on different approaches to embedding social value in the procurement stage of the commissioning process. Numerous insights can be garnered from the studies by using a range of data collection and analysis techniques.

In each of the three case studies, there is an opportunity to analyse further how the co-design of outcomes helped set the agenda for delivering social value contracts. A comparison of different processes of embedding social value across cases would surely also yield valuable insights.

A different yet related set of research questions could be articulated, focusing, for example, on the factors that influence people's decisions when embedding social value. Moreover, new data could be collected using different research methods, such as ethnographic enquiry or participatory action research.

A more constructivist approach that focuses on how front-line workers construct social value in the procurement process could also be taken. Such an approach might open up extensive new data sets by working with focus groups or using vignettes, story completion tasks, and researcher diaries.

There are many opportunities to research further the methodologies of measuring social value in local contracts and critically assess what works and what does not. For example, future research might explore the factors that influence the local contracting authorities' approach to commissioning social value, including measuring that social value for their local services.

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Appendices

Appendix A.1: Data capture

Data capture

Each participant was asked permission for their interview to be recorded; all the participants gave consent other than a few exceptions. The data was captured using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were collected in the English language. Most of the interviews were held face-to-face, with exceptions where the data was collected by phone or through Skype.


At the beginning of each interview, the consent form was handed to the participant for them to read and sign it. The hard copy was kept by the researcher. In a few cases, record the conversation was not allowed (e.g., with the commissioners) nor was the consent form signed. In one instance, a consultant agreed to be recorded but did not give consent for the data to be by refusing to sign the consent form. Conversely, two commissioners did not agree to be recorded but did sign the consent form. There were a few cases where the researcher agreed, at their request, to send the data transcripts to the participants if anything was to be published, for verification purposes.

All the interviewees, apart from in some informal conversations' contexts, were asked to read and sign the consent form, which set out the conditions for data protection, data management and permission for the tape recording. Before starting each conversation, the consent form and data confidentiality were introduced to the participants and, regardless of the method used, whether face-to-face meetings, by phone, through Skype conversations, they were asked to give voluntary, informed consent. Therefore, at the start of each interview, there is a recording of them signing the consent form setting out the terms of data confidentiality (see Appendix no 2). These forms were kept by the researcher.

The average interview was of between 30 to 90 minutes in duration. With the consent of the participants, they were digitally recorded. There were some exceptions. During the face-to-face meetings, there was an opportunity for the researcher to see the participants and how they were reacting to the issues being analysed. In some cases, notes were taken during informal conversations or where recording was not allowed. These were then digitally recorded in the files.

Most of the participants were very busy people with tight schedules. It was important that time limits were adhered to.

Appendix A.2: Consent Form

The Open University

CONSENT FORM_INTERVIEW

**FACULTY OF BUSINESS & LAW
CENTRE FOR VOLUNTARY SECTOR LEADERSHIP**

The commissioning for social value and voluntary sector organizations: tensions in implementation

Name of participant: _____

Name of principal investigator(s): CRISTINA MITITELU

1. I consent to participate in this project.

2. I understand that my participation will involve being interviewed and I agree that the researcher may use the results for research purposes.

3. I acknowledge that:

- a. I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project without explanation or prejudice and to request the destruction of any data that have been gathered from me until the point of completion of the initial report, namely before 1st of October 2018. After this point data will have been processed and it will not be possible to withdraw any unprocessed data, I have provided
- b. the project is for the purpose of research
- c. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements
- d. I have been informed that with my consent the data generated will be stored at Open University and will be destroyed after two years, from the completion of the PhD award, unless I agree to be archived by OU. The raw original data could be archived by the OU, in accord with its policies and guidelines of transparency and openness and in agreement with the requirements specified by OU third parties for data sharing to inform further potential research.
- e. If necessary, any data from me will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research
- f. I have been given contact details for a person whom I can contact if I have any concerns about the way in which this research project is being conducted
- g. I have been informed that a summary copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I request this.

I consent to being audio- recorded ☐ yes ☐ no
(Please tick)

I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings ☐ yes ☐ no
(Please tick)

Email or postal address to which a summary should be sent: _____

Participant signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Cristina Mititelu
Anthony Nutt PhD Scholar/Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership
The Open University Business School, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA

May 2017 <http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research>

Appendix A.3: Ethics Approval

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)	 The Open University
From	Dr Claire Hewson The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee
Email	Claire.hewson@open.ac.uk
Extension	(6) 54519
To	Cristina Mititelu
Project title:	The commissioning for social value and voluntary sector organizations: tensions in implementation
HREC ref	HREC/2781/Mititelu

Memorandum

Date application submitted: 25/01/2018
Date of HREC response: 12/02/2018

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, has been given a favourable opinion by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Please note the following:

1. You are responsible for notifying the HREC immediately of any information received by you, or of which you become aware which would cast doubt on, or alter, any information contained in the original application, or a later amendment which would raise questions about the safety and/or continued conduct of the research.
2. It is essential that any proposed amendments to the research are sent to the HREC for review so they can be recorded and where required, a favourable opinion given prior to any changes being implemented (except only in cases of emergency when the welfare of the participant or researcher is or may be affected).
3. Please include your HREC reference number in any documents or correspondence. It is essential that it is included in any publicity related to your research, e.g. when seeking participants or advertising your research so it is clear that it has been reviewed by HREC and adheres to OU ethics review processes.
4. You are authorised to present this memorandum to outside bodies such as NHS Research Ethics Committees in support of any application for future research clearance. Also, where there is an external ethics review, a copy of the application and outcome should be sent to the HREC.
5. OU research ethics review procedures are fully compliant with the majority of grant awarding bodies and where they exist, their frameworks for research ethics.
6. At the end of your project, you are required to assess your research for ethics related issues and/or major changes. Where these have occurred you will need to provide the Committee with a HREC final report to reflect how these were dealt with using the final

www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/November 2017


report template on the research ethics website -
<http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research/full-review-process-final-report>

Best regards

Dr Claire Hewson
The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix A.4: Interview Structure

INTERVIEW FORM



PhD RESEARCH PROJECT

INTERVIEW FORM

You are invited to participate in an interview aimed to inform the research development of a project financed by the Anthony Nutt Scholarship within the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, at the Open University Business School, Milton Keynes. The name of the PhD project is “Commissioning for Social Value and VSOs: Tensions in implementation” and aim to explore the Public Services (Social Value) Act (2012) and social value commissioning at policy and practice level and identify the tensions for VSOs in engaging with the social value policy. We are highly interested in the work of your organization, and you have been selected to participate in this research project, based on your expertise in the field.

The interview duration will be around 50 minutes.

*Note. The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure that the contribution is accurately captured, and you will have the possibility to check the transcripts. All the information provided will be reproduced and used in an aggregate manner. The answers will be confidential and anonymized unless agreed otherwise.

Please do not hesitate to contact the researcher for further information, at the following email address: cristina.mititelu@open.ac.uk

Thank you for your time and availability!


Best Regards

Cristina Mititelu
Anthony Nutt PhD Scholar
Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership
The Open University Business School, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA

PART I- IDENTIFICATION OF THE ORGANSATION

Organisation name	
Location (City)	
Person of contact & position	
Field of interest	
Address & website of the organization	

INTERVIEW FORM



PART II – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your job role and your experience with the commissioning for social value?
How long has your organization been working on social value?

2. How would you articulate and define social value?
• What does it mean for you (in your own words and understanding)?

3. What is your opinion about the Public Service (Social Value) Act 2012?

4. Please, could you describe your local authority experience with commissioning for social value process, especially in relation to voluntary sector organizations?

5. Do you have any examples of cases of success of local council implementing the Social Value Act (2012)? And effectively involving voluntary sector organizations'?

6. Please, can you describe an example of successful project of commissioning for social value between the local council and VSOs in your local area?

7. Please, can you describe the wider context of changes in state-sector relationships (like austerity, cuts etc.) and its impact on commissioning for social value?

8. Do you have any other thoughts, based on your experience with these issues, which you would like to share?

Thank you for your time.

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